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The Observer

Established 1791

Home truths

Who speaks for the left now?

Andrew Rawnsley

Labour's plan to build Nightingale asylum hotels

Rachel Sylvester

Farage avoids tax on his constituency house

Jon Ungoed-Thomas

The Union Jack and me

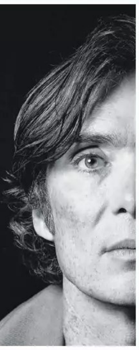
Kenan Malik

'Angela Rayner had pure class. Our class'

Kimia Zabihyan
Grenfell Next Of Kin

Cillian Murphy

Hollywood's soul man 'I have zero interest in contentment'



Back to petroleum

How BP abandoned its green ambitions

The Voice of Hind Rajab

The Gaza film that brought Venice to its feet

36

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The Observer
ESTABLISHED 1791
Sunday 7 September, 2025

‘The enemy of nonsense’
George Orwell, *The Observer*

Issue No. 12,196

In a class of her own

Politics operates in two realms: the abstract and the mundane. In the abstract, there is the bluster, the proposals and the plans. In the mundane: the actual job of meeting people, talking to them, and making decisions. After a torrid week in which Angela Rayner was forced to resign from government after being found to have broken the ministerial code, Grenfell Tower advocate Kimia Zabihyan writes of her experience of working with Rayner in her role as housing secretary, describing tense meetings and emotional outbursts. What is clear: Rayner won their respect for the humane way she practised her politics.
Forum, page 26

Inside No 10

You’d be forgiven for thinking “delivery, delivery, delivery” was a new slogan for Deliveroo. It’s not: it’s Keir Starmer’s autumn battle cry to announce “phase two” of his government. How very Starmerish. Hastened by Rayner’s departure, a full-scale cabinet reshuffle signals significant changes for policy. Rachel Sylvester, political editor, makes sense of what has really changed.
News, pages 6-7

Back to petroleum

Five long years ago, the CEO of BP, Bernard Looney, stood in front of a ballroom full of investors, journalists and executives, and announced a new strategy. It was going green. Ish. But then, the world – and our ambitions for net zero – changed. Alexi Mostrous investigates how Britain’s best-known energy company came to abandon its green ambitions.
News, pages 10-12

Flags of convenience

What’s in a white-and-red cross? Everything, writes Kenan Malik, but we won’t all agree on what it means. In a new essay on the complexity of British identity, Malik writes: “To be English or British is to engage with the richness of contradictions, to wrestle with ambiguities, not simply distil it down to a single set of meanings.”
News, pages 16-17

Inside the New Review

George and Amal Clooney push the gondola out
Venice 2025 – film festival diary

New Review

Róisín Lanigan

Whisper it, but, Taylor Swift: is she really all that?
Page 5

Cillian Murphy

The Oscar winner talks to Olivia Ovenden about surviving the fallout of Oppenheimer
Page 8

Gary Kemp

The former Spandau Ballet band member relives the dressing-up box nights at Blitz and Limelight
Page 14

Extinction Event

Simon Barnes recalls seeing the last ever slender-billed curlew
Page 16

Books

How not to fix the internet

Naomi Alderman compares competing visions of the digital future from Tim Berners-Lee and Nick Clegg
NR Page 30

Ian McEwan

Anthony Cummins reviews What We Can Know, the gripping new novel set in a flooded Britain
NR Page 33

Art against fascism

How a group of pioneering British cultural figures came together in the 1930s to foment an artistic revolution
NR Page 35

Forum

Andrew Rawnsley

Angela Rayner’s departure threatens to bring simmering Labour anxieties to the boil
Page 25

Kamia Zabihyan

Angela Rayner listened to Grenfell’s bereaved and then acted. She had pure class. Our class.
Page 26

The eternal dictators

Kate Maltby on Putin and Xi Jinping’s hunger for immortality
Page 27

Magazine

Sarah Manavis

The Artist’s Way is objectively hokey, but it taught me a life lesson
Page 5

Miriam Margolyes

The actor on the perils of living life as herself
Page 6

Hit the road

Are we entering a new golden age of hitchhiking?
Page 8

That’s a wrap

Yasmin Khan on the enduring appeal of the kebab
Page 16

7 days

Overheard

‘You get to see the mechanics of the solar system at play’

Dr Edward Bloomer, astronomer at the Royal Observatory Greenwich, on today’s Blood Moon solar eclipse

The week in brief

Rayner exit sparks Cabinet reshuffle

Keir Starmer made a cabinet reshuffle after Angela Rayner resigned over failing to pay enough stamp duty on a flat in Hove. Rayner had referred herself to the ethics adviser Sir Laurie Magnus, who ruled that she had acted in good faith but not received expert tax advice and so had failed to conduct herself to the highest standard. David Lammy was appointed deputy prime minister and justice secretary, with Yvette Cooper replacing him as foreign secretary and Shabana Mahmood moving to the Home Office. There will be an election to choose a new deputy party leader. Lucy Powell (leader of the House) and Ian Murray (Scotland) left the cabinet.

At the start of the week, Starmer had “reset” his Downing Street team by moving Darren Jones from being Rachel Reeves’s deputy at the Treasury to the new post of “chief secretary to the prime minister”. Other changes included the appointment of Baroness Shafik, a former deputy governor of the Bank of England, as Starmer’s economics adviser and Tim Allan, a former senior aide to Tony Blair, as director of communications.
News, pages 6-7; Forum, page 25

8.4%

Drop in children’s book sales over the past quarter versus the same period in 2024. *NielsenIQ*

Pope begs Israel for ceasefire in Gaza

Pope Leo XIV met Isaac Herzog, the Israeli president, at the Vatican and expressed his hope that a permanent ceasefire could be urgently reached in Gaza, allowing for the safe entry of humanitarian aid and the release of all hostages. However, Israel is still pressing ahead with its offensive on Gaza City as tens of thousands of reservists were mobilised for an operation codenamed Gideon’s Chariots II. The White House is reportedly considering a plan to offer 2 million Palestinians $5,000 a head to leave Gaza as part of the postwar reconstruction plan.
News, page 5

UK like North Korea on free speech: Farage

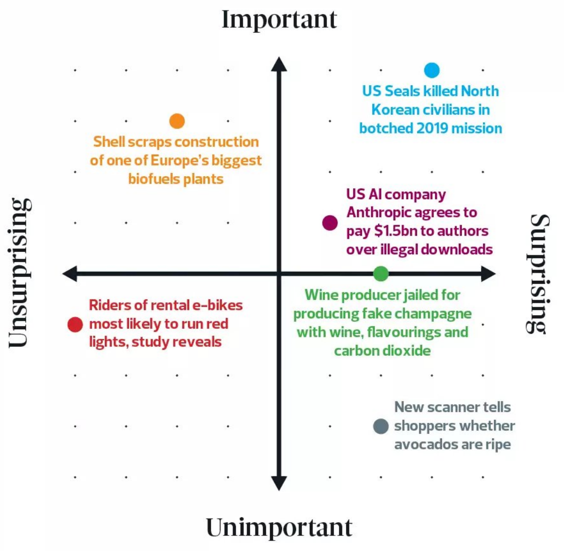
Nigel Farage told a US congressional committee that Britain is turning into North Korea as the Reform UK leader defended freedom of speech on a visit to Washington. Farage invoked the cases of Graham Linehan, the comedy writer who was arrested over tweets about trans people, and Lucy Connolly, jailed for inciting racial hatred, as examples of “the really awful authoritarian situation that the UK has sunk into”. He was criticised by a congressman for supporting Vladimir Putin while Starmer accused him of “badmouthing” Britain. Reform gained another high-profile member as Nadine Dorries, the former Tory culture secretary under Boris Johnson, defected to the party before its conference, at which Farage told members he could be prime minister as early as 2027.
News, page 8

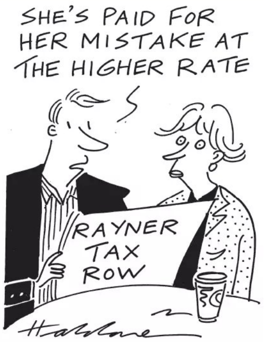
Donatella Versace arrives to pay her respects at Milan’s Armani Theatre, where the Italian fashion designer Giorgio Armani is lying in state, surrounded by candles. Armani died on 4 September, aged 91. Stefano Rellandini/AFP/Getty

Putin talks immortality with Xi at big parade

Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping were picked up discussing organ transplants and the possibility of eternal life during a military parade in Beijing. The Russian president was heard via a “hot mic” to be telling his Chinese counterpart that medical advances mean that people could “even achieve immortality”. Xi, who like Putin is 72, replied that humans may live to 150 in this century. Kim Jong Un, president of North Korea, who is a mere 41, was also present at the parade but not involved in the discussion.
World, pages 19-21

The Observer news matrix




SHE’S PAID FOR HER MISTAKE AT THE HIGHER RATE
RAYNER TAX ROW

Earthquake appeal for flattened Afghanistan

Some 2,200 people are believed to have died in Afghanistan after three earthquakes that registered between 5.5 and 6 on the Richter scale flattened villages in the east of the country. The Taliban government has appealed for international aid, with the World Health Organization saying it wants to raise $4m to provide food and medical supplies for the region. WHO warned that landslides have blocked the main roads, hampering its relief efforts.

New Green boss in challenge to Starmer

Zack Polanski, a 42-year-old “eco populist”, was elected leader of the Green party and warned the prime minister that he intends to replace Labour as the main party on the left. Polanski, a former actor and hypnotherapist who supports Britain leaving Nato, won the election by a large majority over a joint ticket of two of their four MPs, although less than 38% of the membership voted. He has sat on the London Assembly since 2021 and became the party’s deputy leader the next year.
Profile, page 30

Jarmusch film scoops Golden Lion at Venice

The Venice Film Festival awarded the Golden Lion award for the best film to the US indie director Jim Jarmusch in a surprise result. His film, *Father Mother Sister Brother*, is a drama about the uneasy relationships between parents and their adult children. The film features an ensemble cast including Tom Waits, Mayim Bialik, Charlotte Rampling and Cate Blanchett. “I thank you for appreciating our quiet film,” said Jarmusch. The film was not a favourite for the top prize, with many critics instead tipping *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, a harrowing true-life account of the killing of a five-year-old Palestinian girl during the Gaza war.

On the cover

Former deputy prime minister Angela Rayner, photographed by Pål Hansen for The Observer in 2023.

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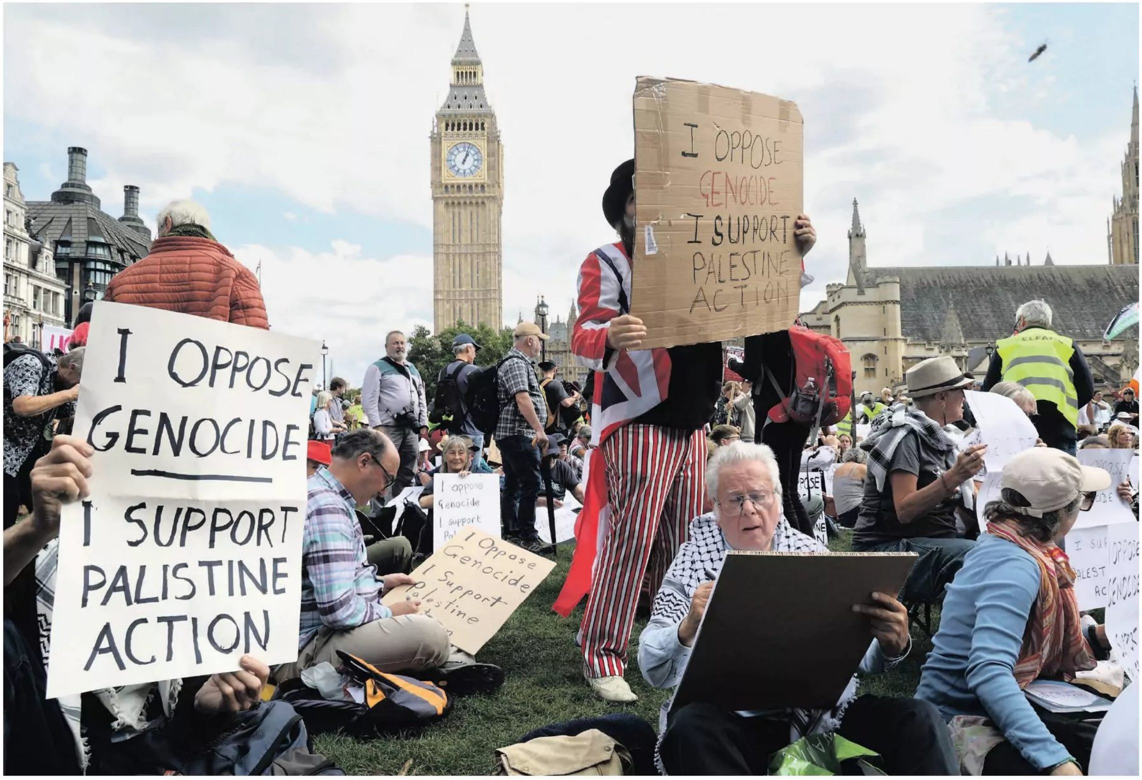

I OPPOSE GENOCIDE
I SUPPORT PALISTINE ACTION
I OPPOSE GENOCIDE I SUPPORT PALESTINE ACTION

LEFT
A total of 1,304 people had agreed to hold signs at yesterday's protest; officers used hubs to process arrests more quickly.
Andy Hall/ The Observer

'Labour's poll tax moment': hundreds of arrests at Palestine Action protest

Protesters and police clash during a mass demonstration in Parliament Square where 1,000 people aimed to be arrested. *John Simpson* reports

Through the cacophony of loudhailers and drums rose a now familiar sound, the squeak of a marker pen writing: "I oppose genocide, I support Palestine Action."

Scuffles and chants of "Shame on you" followed the Metropolitan police as they arrested hundreds of people for terrorism offences in Parliament Square in London yesterday.

Officers faced physical and verbal abuse in what the force called a "coordinated effort" to disrupt the arrests of those holding the signs, with additional arrests for assault among a fringe group.

Defend Our Juries, a campaign group that helped to organise the latest demonstration, had aimed for the arrests of at least 1,000 people. It claimed that more than that number had been present yesterday, calling the protest Labour's "poll tax moment".

By 9pm, a total of 425 arrests had been confirmed, but officers were making slow progress. A Met source said it was expecting to make a maximum of 500 arrests and that a violent element had impeded officers.

It appeared that scores of people had simply chosen to go home rather than wait to be arrested, but a police decision not to arrest anyone with "unclear signs" contributed to the lower number. Signs and T-shirts on display included references to Plasticine Action or other less obvious shows of support.

Many of those holding signs said that seeing the mass arrests of demonstrators at a similar protest last month had prompted them to take action themselves.

Amaryllis, 41, was waiting in Parliament Square. "I watched them arrest lots of elderly and disabled people last time," she said. "What's going on in Gaza is a genocide and everyone with a moral compass should be here."

> *'What's going on in Gaza is a genocide, and everyone with a moral compass should be here'*
> ***Amaryllis, 41***

Palestine Action was proscribed in July after three incidents at arms factories, one of which involved an allegation of GBH.

Amaryllis, an addiction recovery worker, added: "I'm a Londoner. I was here on 7/7 [the bombings of 7 July 2005]. I know what terrorism is."

The record for mass arrests in the UK dates back to 1961, when 1,341 people were arrested for obstructing the highway during a protest for nuclear disarmament organised by the Committee of 100, the anti-war group co-founded by the philosopher Bertrand Russell.

A total of 1,304 people had agreed in advance to hold signs at yesterday's protest, according to the Lift the Ban campaign. Officers used street "hubs" with the intention of processing arrests more quickly and releasing suspects on bail, but Defend Our Juries briefed its supporters not to accept police bail.

Many said they would insist on being taken to a police station.

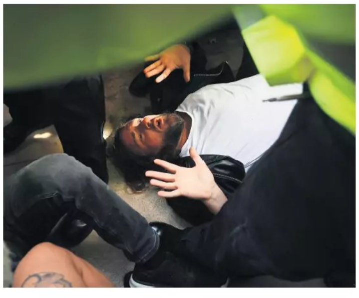
Di and Hannah Keal, a mother and daughter, travelled to London from North Yorkshire to be arrested for a second time, saying that they had been unable to wait for the police to get round to them last month. "We just share a belief about what's happening in Gaza. It's beyond anything I've seen in my lifetime. It's genocide, and our government is rolling out the red carpet for the Israeli president."

The government has defended the visit of Isaac Herzog, the president of Israel, who is expected in the UK on Wednesday and Thursday, despite his comments forming part of an international court of justice finding last year that there was a "plausible risk of genocide" in Gaza.

Other protesters cited the use of RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus as a base for surveillance flights over Gaza and the continued sale of parts for F-35 fighter jets on the global market in the knowledge they were reaching Israel.

Yesterday, it emerged that a factory in Bristol run by Elbit, Israel's largest weapons manufacturer, would be shut down. The site was repeatedly targeted by Palestine Action.

A Met spokesman said last night: "Officers continue to make arrests of individuals showing support for the proscribed terrorist organisation Palestine Action at the Defend Our Juries protest."



LEFT
Many of those holding signs said they had been inspired to take action by a similar protest last month.
Andy Hall/ The Observer

Musical chairs: Keir Starmer ushers in a new cabinet of trusted ‘fixers and doers’

The prime minister’s reshuffle signals a clear determination to tackle issues such as immigration and welfare by putting the ministers he considers most effective in charge, writes *Rachel Sylvester*

A giant electronic whiteboard dominated the No 10 study as Keir Starmer and his closest advisers planned their first major reshuffle last week. Names were moved effortlessly around between departments on the touch screen as the prime minister’s new cabinet took shape in the wake of Angela Rayner’s resignation.

For veterans of the Blair era, the “super-whizzy” technology was a revelation. “In the old days it was Post-it notes,” one said, “and there was a time when Downing Street called up the wrong peer by mistake to offer him a ministerial job.”

The digital age may finally have reached Whitehall, but the fundamentals of politics have not changed. This reshuffle, like so many before it, was all about power, ambition and survival.

The loss of Rayner was a huge blow to the government and to the prime minister personally, as the handwritten note to his former deputy showed, but Starmer acted swiftly to seize the initiative.

With 10 Whitehall departments getting a new secretary of state, Charlie Falconer, the former Labour lord chancellor, said the prime minister had delivered a form of “electric shock” therapy to his government. John Healey, the defence secretary, is the only member of Starmer’s 2020 top team who is still in the same job.

That Britain is on its ninth foreign secretary and 13th justice secretary in 15 years does not create an impression of stability or encourage good government. The gilt-trimmed lord chancellor’s gown, which had to be shortened by 14 inches and pinned up with safety pins for the diminutive Shabana Mahmood, will now have to be lengthened again just 14 months later for her successor David Lammy.

The reshuffle was not a shift to the left or right, it was a move towards the fixers and doers. The priority for No 10 was to put the most effective ministers in charge of the areas where the government is struggling most – tackling illegal immigration, curbing the spiralling benefits bill and improving relations with business. One Labour source said: “It’s true that Keir has never liked Yvette [Cooper]. She’s very difficult to work with – prickly and indecisive. But the main thing is that Keir knows that he needs to sort out small boats and welfare reform and Shabana [Mahmood] and Pat [McFadden] are the two ministers he thinks deliver for him.” The most significant changes are in the Home Office. There has been a virtual clearout of ministers with Angela Eagle, the immigration minister and Diana Johnson, the policing minister, moving to other departments.

Downing Street has become frustrated with Cooper, who has failed to either stop the boats crossing the Channel or close the asylum hotels. The prime minister was determined to move her, but that meant flattering her with an apparent promotion to the Foreign Office. Mahmood, who replaced her at the Home Office, had impressed No 10 with her handling of the prisons crisis at the Ministry of Justice. “She’s taken on a difficult brief that could have been nothing but trouble and been extremely diligent and efficient in dealing with it,” one source said.

The new home secretary is said to be ready to “think the unthinkable” on small boats and asylum hotels, including changing the law to clarify the way in which the European Convention on Human Rights is interpreted by judges in asylum cases.

The reshuffle was about more than personalities and the policy implications are broad. The introduction of a universal digital ID system is now all but inevitable. Cooper was resisting the plan but Mahmood has “always been supportive”, insiders say.

The appointment of McFadden, one of Starmer’s most trusted allies, to run a new superministry, combining the Department for Work and Pensions with responsibility for skills

David Lammy becomes deputy prime minister while Shabana Mahmood is moving to the Home Office.

Nightingale hotels

The government is drawing up plans to build dozens of pop-up “Nightingale” accommodation blocks on Ministry of Defence land to rehouse asylum seekers.

The Ministry of Defence and the Home Office have already found places where the temporary homes could be erected quickly.

“Land has been identified by the MoD,” one Whitehall source said. “All options are being assessed.”

The proposal is one of the ideas being considered by a new taskforce set up last week to drive through the government’s promise to close the asylum hotels. Similar to the vaccine taskforce, which oversaw the rollout of jabs during the pandemic, it will bring together ministers, businesses and local authorities to find solutions.

Shabana Mahmood, the new home secretary, is determined to think imaginatively about how to tackle illegal immigration. “Nothing will be off the table,” one ally said.

Darren Jones, the prime minister’s new chief secretary, is also said to be open to radical ideas, which could include installing mobile units, similar to the Nightingale hospitals created during the pandemic.

Last week Keir Starmer promised to go “further and faster” to tackle illegal immigration, including bringing forward the 2029 deadline for closing the hotels.

Rachel Sylvester

Keironomics marks start of Whitehall reshaping of state

Rachel Sylvester
Political Editor

The chancellor, Rachel Reeves, was the still point of the turning world in cabinet but, around her, economic and social policy is shifting.

The recent appointment of Minouche Shafik, the former deputy governor of the Bank of England, as the prime minister’s economics adviser, and the promotion of Torsten Bell, the former chief executive of the Resolution Foundation, to lead the budget preparations are a sign of an emerging “Keironomics” that could lead to a gradual reshaping of the state.

Both Shafik and Bell have called for a significant rebalancing to put a greater focus on intergenerational fairness and better align taxes on income and assets. The influence of the Resolution Foundation, a think-tank that focuses on low earners, is increasingly clear across Whitehall.

Dan Tomlinson, now a Treasury minister, Vidhya Alakeson, Starmer’s deputy chief of staff, and Matthew Pennycook, the housing minister, all worked for it before joining the government.

The Resolution Foundation’s Economy 2030 inquiry, which Lady Shafik co-chaired and Bell oversaw, warned that Britain had become a “stagnation nation” beset by a toxic combination of “slow growth and high inequality”.

There is “nothing economically or democratically sustainable” about a situation in which 4 million people experienced destitution in 2022, it concluded.

The report called for the pension triple lock to be scrapped and the two-child benefit cap abolished. It also proposed a new more “proportional property tax” with a revaluation of council tax bands and stamp duty slashed.

No 10 sources stress that not every idea previously proposed by the new appointees will be adopted by the government. But the direction of travel is obvious.

Allies say that Starmer has known Shafik since he was the director of public prosecutions and she was permanent secretary at the Department for International Development, and admires her intellectual rigour. “It was not a random pick,” said an ally.

One Whitehall grandee said:

> *‘The question is – will people like Morgan McSweeney say it doesn’t fit with our political strategy?’*

LEFT
Rayner with Starmer. Her departure was a blow to the government and to the prime minister.
Ian Forsyth/Getty

transferred from the Department for Education, is a sign the prime minister still hopes to drive through welfare reform. Steve Reed, another Starmer loyalist, takes over the housing department with allies promising that he intends to "build, build, build".

Peter Kyle, the new business secretary, has been told to restore links with business leaders who are angry about the rise in employer national insurance contributions and new workers' rights. "Labour's relationship with business has not been its strong suit. His role will be to improve that," one No 10 source said. He speaks fluent business." Jason Stockwood, a businessman, has been appointed investment minister.

> *'Keir has never liked Cooper. She's very difficult to work with: prickly and indecisive'*
>
> ***Labour insider***

Labour's deputy leadership contest will ensure the political direction of the government remains centre stage, although by making Lammy deputy prime minister, Starmer has detached the government and party roles.

The Labour left will struggle to get enough nominations, but there is likely to be a candidate from the soft left, highlighting tensions about the approach being taken by No 10. One source suggested Starmer had been forced into pursuing a "Lady Gaga dress strategy", a reference to the singer's outfit made of steaks. "He's been a pescatarian forced to eat red meat for the red wall."

Critics are sceptical that a reshuffle which some in the party think more closely resembles Lewis Carroll's mad hatter's tea party, in which the same people randomly move around the table, than Harold Macmillan's Night of the Long Knives will "shift the dial" for the prime minister without a clearer message. "Drama, but to what purpose?" one former minister said.

When Starmer opened the cabinet away day at Chequers in July, he surprised ministers by talking about his family. He explained how his sister, who works as a carer, had been forced to take holiday time off when she got Covid during the pandemic. He lamented that his brother, who died last year, had been judged because of his learning difficulties. One cabinet minister recalls: "He said: 'People ask why do I do this? What's the point? And the reason I'm doing it is to give more dignity and life chances to people like them'. It was a side of him that even his cabinet colleagues hadn't seen before." A No 10 source said: "Keir is most animated by the idea of giving opportunities to young people, or improving social mobility and respect regardless of background. That's his driving philosophy."

With a new cabinet and Downing Street team, Starmer has to use his party conference speech and the budget to communicate this "irreducible core". "Politics is about using your voice and Keir doesn't make the argument," one Labour peer said. "We are focusing too much on Reform [rather] than rebuilding trust with voters. The question he has to answer is – what kind of country does he want Britain to be?"

"Keironomics is there to be shaped. I think Minouche can do it – she will have strong views. The question is, will people like Morgan McSweeney [the prime minister's chief of staff] be saying: 'That's all very well, but it doesn't fit with our political strategy, which is all about immigration and Nigel Farage.'"

Andy Haldane, the former chief economist at the Bank of England, who knows Shafik and Bell well, said they are both a "significant upgrade" on what went before but is "sceptical" that the government machine can "rise to the scale of the challenge" facing the country.

Minouche Shafik, the PM's economic adviser. *Sophia Evans*

"The Treasury is weaker than at any time in my working life," said Haldane.

Crossbench peer Jim O'Neill, a former Treasury minister and Goldman Sachs economist, believes the rising cost of government borrowing means the chancellor must be bold in the budget on 26 November.

"Ever since the welfare climbdown, the markets have been subtly showing signs of being more concerned than they were before," said O'Neill.

Property taxes, the pension triple lock, welfare reform and NHS productivity should, in his view, be top of the list.

"*Foreign Sec has become a demotion*

ANALYSIS

Steve Bloomfield
International Editor

David Lammy was supposed to fly to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates this weekend for a series of meetings about securing a peace deal in Gaza. Instead, he is back at home, getting up to speed on prison reform.

For the past four years Lammy has been Labour's face to the world. He has glad-handed leaders, built relationships and tried to create a post-Brexit role where Britain can once again be a bridge between the US and the rest of Europe. Now his replacement as foreign secretary, Yvette Cooper, needs to start from scratch. And she really is starting from scratch. Aside from three months as shadow foreign secretary in late 2010, her 28-year political career has been entirely UK-focused.

In Westminster, her appointment is being viewed as a demotion – a move to an ostensibly important role, but a punishment for supposedly failing at the Home Office. What does it say about the way Britain sees the rest of the world that our most senior diplomat has been chosen in this way?

Since 1997, the most successful foreign secretaries have either had a vision (Robin Cook's "ethical" foreign policy) or the unwavering support of No 10 (William Hague, David Cameron). It's unclear, so far, if Cooper has either.

Her biggest challenge will be Gaza. Lammy's Gulf trip was aimed at coming up with a workable plan for Palestinian statehood, which Britain is set to back at a UN conference on 22 September.

In her defence in *The Observer* of the decision to proscribe Palestine Action as a terrorist group, Cooper actually went further than Lammy in her criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza, referring to "crimes against humanity". Will she back these words with actions? What will she say when Israel's president, Isaac Herzog, visits London this week?

To succeed, Cooper will need to help the Foreign Office itself work out its own role in the world – and within the UK government. Much of the UK's foreign policy is now run out of No 10 and since the Department for International Development was shut down and the aid budget slashed, the moral heart of the country's foreign policy has been missing.

If Cooper wants to show she will do things differently, she could start by immediately increasing the paltry £1m the UK has donated to the relief effort in Afghanistan after last week's devastating earthquake.

My home in Clacton is my partner's, says Farage

Jon Ungoed-Thomas & Stephen Armstrong

Nigel Farage said yesterday he "misspoke" when he claimed to have bought a new home in his Clacton constituency, as he faced questions over whether he had avoided tens of thousands of pounds in stamp duty.

Farage now insists the property was solely bought by his partner, Laure Ferrari, and has told reporters it was her "sole asset". The Reform UK leader would have faced an extra tax bill of about £44,000 for additional properties if it had been registered in his name. He has described claims that he may have saved tax on the property in Clacton-on-Sea as a "disgusting allegation, unfair and untrue".

"I should have said 'we'," he told Sky News. "My partner bought it, so what?" He had previously claimed his name did not appear on the property documents for "security reasons".

Farage was quick to exploit the political capital from the stamp duty row which ousted Angela Rayner, bringing forward his party conference speech.

Stamp duty is paid at rates of up to 5% for residential properties, but an additional 5% is levied for buyers who already own one or more properties. Stamp duty on the new constituency home, which cost nearly £900,000, would have been about £32,000, with an extra charge of about £44,000 for a second home, according to an investigation by the *Mirror*.

The Reform leader is reported to own a property portfolio worth more than £3m, with a £1m family home, two homes in Kent and a property in Surrey. He is the UK's highest earning MP; he has been paid about £400,000 for his work for GB News and about £280,00 by Direct Bullion, which encourages investors to buy gold.

Farage's tax affairs were "irrelevant to what voters are concentrating on, which is our messaging, which is the message of hope", Reform's deputy leader Richard Tice said yesterday.

Farage has faced criticism over claims he was barely spending any time in the constituency.

Nigel Farage described claims he may have saved stamp duty as 'unfair and untrue'.

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Covid jab may have caused royal cancers, says Reform speaker

Catherine Neilan & Jon Ungoed-Thomas

A vaccine sceptic was given a platform at Reform's party conference yesterday to claim that Covid vaccines may have caused the cancers of the king and Princess of Wales.

British cardiologist Dr Aseem Malhotra claimed that it was "highly likely" vaccines may have been a factor in cancers among members of the royal family. Health secretary Wes Streeting criticised Reform for giving a platform to "poisonous lies".

Malhotra said he was sharing the views of an expert who he considered was one of the UK's most eminent cancer doctors. "He thinks it's highly likely the Covid vaccines have been a factor, a significant factor, in the cancer of members of the royal family."

A Reform spokesperson distanced the party from his views. They said it did not endorse what he said, but stressed it "believes in free speech".

Malhotra is chief medical adviser to the US group MAHA Action, which is championing the agenda of US health secretary Robert F Kennedy Jr to "Make America Healthy Again".

Malhotra told the conference in Birmingham that hundreds of studies showed the harms of mRNA vaccines and that they were interfering with genes. "It may be a risk factor for cancer," Malhotra said at a talk entitled Make Britain Healthy Again.

He was introduced to the conference by party chairman Dr David Bull, who described him as a "brilliant clinician".

Streeting said it was "irresponsible" of the party to allow Malhotra to speak in Birmingham, with claims about the pharmaceutical industry, politicians and the World Health Organization yesterday.

Streeting said: "When we are seeing falling numbers of parents getting their children vaccinated, and a resurgence of disease we had previously eradicated, it is shockingly irresponsible for Nigel Farage to give a platform to these poisonous lies."

Medical experts also criticised Malhotra. Brian Ferguson, professor of viral immunology at the University of Cambridge, said the speaker had indulged in "meaningless pseudoscience".

The link between the Covid jab and cancer has been dismissed by academics and oncologists after claims it led to "turbo cancers".

"This kind of outlandish conspiracy theory only serves to undermine the credibility of those spreading it." Ferguson said the evidence showed vaccines had saved millions of lives.

During his 15-minute speech, Malhotra said having the Covid vaccine was more likely to cause harm than the virus itself. He said: "What does that mean? It is highly likely that not a single person should have been injected with this."

He also claimed the WHO had been "captured" by Microsoft founder Bill Gates. He hit out at health minister Stephen Kinnock, who had criticised Malhotra before his speech, calling him an "anti-vax conspiracy theorist".

Vaccine sceptic Aseem Malhotra spoke at the Reform party conference.

He said: "What do we do about this? I think it's time to just say no, to all drugs that are being proved, unless they are independently evaluated. Everybody just needs to say no. Over the last few years, it's very clear that, with the evidence, the drug industry are responsible for probably killing millions of people."

Before the speech Reform delegates told *The Observer* they were sympathetic to Malhotra's position on Covid vaccines, but insisted they were not against vaccines more generally. One said they regretted having had the jab, which was required at the time for international travel and some work, because they believed they were being "experimented on".

A Reform UK spokesman said: "Dr Aseem Malhotra is a guest speaker with his own opinions who has an advisory role in the US government. Reform UK does not endorse what he said but does believe in free speech."

Brontë meets Bridgerton meets Barbie: purists slate Wuthering Heights trailer

A first glance at Emerald Fennell's raunchy take on the classic novel sends the internet into a frenzy

Rachael Healy

Margot Robbie stares into the distance, mouth slightly open. We cut to closeups of dough being kneaded, a sweat-beaded back, fingers dipping into egg yolks, breasts restrained by a velvet corset. The stuttering intro of Charli XCX's Everything Is Romantic plays, overlaid with rumbling bass and gasping breaths.

This is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. At least, the trailer for a new film adaptation of the classic novel by *Saltburn* director Emerald Fennell – and it has sent the internet into a frenzy. "Emily Brontë is rolling in her grave," declared one fan.

Fennell's adaptation has been cultivating controversy for months. First, its casting director was forced to defend appointing Robbie and fellow Australian actor Jacob Elordi as Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, after a backlash over the failure to address the latter's ethnicity, generally interpreted as Romany or Gypsy, and 35-year-old Robbie playing a character who dies as a teenager.

Then, as details leaked from test screenings last month, *Wuthering Heights* purists feared the worst. Audiences reported an "aggressively provocative" feature, with a "stylised depravity" recognisable from Fennell's *Saltburn*.

"People feel very proprietorial about [adaptations], so it's quite a responsibility," said Deborah Moggach, novelist and writer of the screenplay for 2005's *Pride & Prejudice*. "You've got the weight of people's hopes and expectations on your shoulders."

The *Wuthering Heights* trailer confirms a healthy dose of anachronism; surreal backdrops, rooms with blood-red floors, a 1980s-style wedding dress, and even a brief shot of Robbie wearing the trend of the summer – "slutty little glasses". Charli XCX, the pop superstar behind bestselling album *Brat*, will contribute original music.

ABOVE Margot Robbie as Catherine Earnshaw in Wuthering Heights. Left, director Emerald Fennell.
Warner Bros

"It seems like Fennell is prepared to tear up the core themes of the book and turn it into something else," said Wendy Ide, *The Observer*'s chief film critic. The trailer ticks the boxes of conspicuously cool cultural touchpoints and picks up from where *Saltburn's* infamous grave scene left off, but does it shy away from what is truly shocking about Brontë's work? It is a novel of "raw energy, unpredictability and unknowability", said writer and literary critic Catherine Taylor. Adding a glaze of visual perfection could detract from that.

"We're in the age of *Bridgerton*-ing," said Taylor, referencing the successful Netflix drama that has become famous for its raunchy, deliberately anachronistic approach to period drama.

It is often the case, Taylor said, that screen adaptations of literary classics carry hallmarks of the era in which they are made, such as the 1967 version of Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*, which features distinctly decade-appropriate hair and makeup. Looking at the *Wuthering Heights* trailer, Taylor found Cathy's modern makeup jarring, but points to an audience demand for the homogeneous "Instagram face" of this era.

"My philosophy is: one should be truthful to the author and the book, and not show off, not change it for change's sake," said Moggach.

"This was the only novel that Emily Brontë wrote – that's why so many people are so attached to it," said Taylor.

Ide and Taylor see the trailer as "a provocation" – one that's clearly worked. "The fact we're talking about it shows how effective it is," Ide said.

"I still probably won't go and see it," said Taylor. But it has had an unexpected side-effect. "It makes me want to go back to the book for the first time in many years."

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Back
pet

In 2020, BP told the world that it cared about climate change. Today, it is doubling down on oil and gas. This is the story of how financial markets gave up on net zero and how an aggressive US hedge fund helped pressure Britain's best-known energy company to abandon its green ambitions

Alexi Mostrous
Head of Investigations

> *'We need a rapid transition to net zero. For BP to play our part, we have to change. And we want to change'*
> *Bernard Looney in 2020*

As the great and the good filed into the Royal Lancaster hotel overlooking Hyde Park, London, in February 2020, Bernard Looney was feeling nervous.

BP's new chief executive had been secretly preparing for the presentation for weeks, huddled with a small team of internal advisers and McKinsey consultants in a rented office in Mayfair, a 20-minute walk away from the energy giant's headquarters in St James's Square.

But when the 49-year-old Irishman bounded on stage, he projected only confidence. "We need to reinvent BP," Looney told the packed ballroom of executives, top journalists and key shareholders. "It will require nothing short of reimagining energy as we know it."

Flanking Looney, floor-to-ceiling screens scrolled through images of catastrophic weather events and showed social media posts lambasting BP and the oil majors, before fading to reveal BP's new slogan – "Reimagining energy" – written in warm cursive script. Looney's team originally wanted to use "Reinventing energy" but decided against because it made the company sound arrogant.

"We all want energy that is reliable and affordable, but that is no longer enough," he said. "We need a rapid transition to net zero. For BP to play our part, we have to change. And we want to change – this is the right thing for the world and for BP."

Looney promised that by 2030 the company would boost investment in renewables tenfold to $5bn and build wind farms and solar parks with a capacity of 50 gigawatts – roughly enough to supply two thirds of the UK's total grid capacity. Even more ambitious was his pledge the following August to cut oil and gas production from the equivalent of 2.6m barrels of oil a day to 1.5m. Britain's best-known energy company, responsible for pouring 55m tonnes of CO_2 into the atmosphere a year, was going green. Greenpeace described Looney's promise to cut oil as "Christmas come early, decades too late".

Fast forward five years and Christmas, it seems, has been cancelled. In February, under pressure from an aggressive activist hedge fund, Elliott Management, BP announced a wholesale reversal of Looney's reforms, including its commitment to getting to net zero.

"We went too far, too fast," Murray Auchincloss, Looney's successor, said. Auchincloss had served as Looney's finance director and played a big part in the pivot to net zero. Now he was systematically dismantling everything he'd helped build.

In October 2024, Auchincloss had dropped the target to cut oil production and had paused new offshore wind projects. Four months later, in what he called a "fundamental reset", he scrapped a target to boost renewables, promised to sell a share of BP's solar business, Lightsource, and pledged to invest $10bn a year in oil and gas projects. Far from weaning itself off fossil fuels, BP, which shed its colonial legacy as the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company to become British Petroleum in 1954, would grow production to 2.5m barrels a day by 2030.

After a five-year fever-dream, BP is going back to petroleum.

This is the story of how an oil and gas multinational made ambitious claims and abandoned them all – and how financial markets said farewell to net zero. It's a modern morality tale that raises questions about whether fossil fuel companies – not to mention banks and other publicly owned multinationals – can ever be part of the solution to climate change.

"A major international oil company like BP pivoting to green was a significant message of hope," one BP analyst said. "We were one step closer to the end of the hydrocarbon era. And now the question is: is this the end of big oil's pivot to green?"

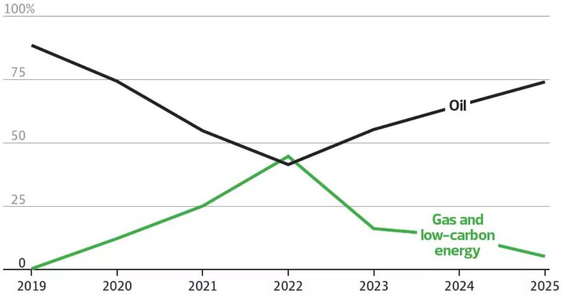
In the course of reporting this story, *The Observer* spoke to BP insiders, former executives, advisors and investors. We asked the company for an interview or to comment on our findings but it said it had nothing to say.

A month after Looney's Royal Lancaster speech, Covid-19 hit the UK. Looney's top team spent lockdown putting flesh on the bones of the plan: which investments the company would target, where it would cut back, and the key staff that would need to be recruited or poached.

In September, Looney presented this work to shareholders. Unlike his February announcement, things did not go well. "The more we talked, the more we undermined confidence," one former BP executive said. "Bernard's ambition excited many in

TOP RIGHT The Thunder Horse oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico, a joint venture of BP and ExxonMobil.
BP

BP capital expenditure
By sector, as a share of US total



Source: Company data

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civil society but alarmed just as many investors." Looney was disappointed. Back in February, most investors had signalled to BP that they were broadly in favour of the transformation.

"Looney's pivot was stuffed full of volume-led targets," one representative of a big shareholder remembered. "Rather than saying, we're going to generate a billion dollars a year from our renewable business, they instead said 'we'll do a gigawatt here, a gigawatt over there. It was completely disconnected from any financial logic." The presentation was "a collection of McKinsey-type slides that looked utterly beautiful – works of art – but lacking any real analytical substance".

They added: "I remember having a meeting with Bernard and he said to me, quite grumpily, if you wait for the evidence rather than investing more money, you'll have missed it. You have to take it on faith."

Many were prepared to take Looney's word for it. "Bernard is one of the most charismatic people I've ever met," said one shareholder. "You walk into a room with the guy and the sun is shining on you."

And although Looney's plan lacked detail, it was a match for the political mood at the time.

"There was an awful lot of political will to transition to net zero," this shareholder said. "Given how firmly we believed this was the right pathway, we didn't want to be seen as critical of the strategy."

In January 2020, Larry Fink, boss of BlackRock, the world's largest investor, wrote in his influential annual letter to chief executives that climate risk was investment risk; "climate change has become a defining factor in companies' long-term prospects". Fink predicted that the world was "on the edge of a fundamental reshaping of finance". A month later, Mark Carney, then governor of the Bank of England, warned that "2020 must be a year of climate action", adding that "investing for a net-zero world must go mainstream".

These two financial powerhouses set the stage for a year of frantic climate policy that was supposed to culminate at the UN Climate Change Conference 26 at Glasgow. In fact, COP26 was postponed for a year due to Covid-19. But when the event finally did take place, green momentum was still evident. Carney used the conference to unveil the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero, a coalition of more than 450 banks, insurers and asset managers across 45 countries that promised to deliver as much as $100tn to help economies transition to net zero.

Against this background of climate optimism, in February 2021 BP and a German partner agreed to pay £924m for the option to build wind farms in the Irish Sea. But the price was nearly double what some other bidders had offered to pay.

"We moved fast but ended up making some poor green investments out of the gate," a former BP executive said. "Offshore wind in the US and UK chief among them."

Around this time, shareholder sentiment soured further. For some, it was simply that BP's investments were not profitable enough. For others, like Mark van Baal, the head of Follow This, an NGO representing "responsible shareholders", BP wasn't radical enough. "It's easy to be a leader in a field of laggards," Van Baal said. "Look at the investments in low carbon energy. In Looney's period it was about 8%. If more than 90% of your investments are still in fossil fuels you can't claim to be in a transition."

Connor Chung, an analyst at the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis, agrees. "The commitments were always more talk than walk. During the years when these firms were supposedly committing to net zero, only 1.4% of global clean energy came from fossil fuels companies."

Even some former BP executives thought the company should behave more like US oil majors, which had always ignored or downplayed climate policies even in the face of government pressure. "BP, unlike Exxon, has always cared enormously about what the world thinks of it – more than perhaps it should," one said.

The division between those who wanted BP to do more on green – and those who urged it to do less – was turbocharged by events outside Looney's control, most obviously Covid-19 and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine – an act of war that spiked oil prices around the world.

"It's easy to look back in retrospect and harshly judge," a former BP executive said. "But Bernard couldn't have anticipated Covid or Russia invading Ukraine. The ground shifted. Socially too. Progressive causes were in vogue, but the pendulum soon started to swing the other way."

Unbeknown to BP, a small group of people at a US hedge fund was closely watching the Looney reforms.

About 18 months after BP's green pivot, portfolio managers at Florida-based Elliott Management discussed whether to take a stake in BP. The fund was already sceptical that BP was on the right track, which meant its share price could be undervalued and the company a potential target.

Elliott's theory was that BP was straying from what it does best. If the company stuck to its core competencies, they thought, that would not only be better for BP's shareholders but better for the market, as it would free up capital that could be invested elsewhere, including in green-energy companies able to generate wind and solar more efficiently than BP.

"Just because you're good at building platforms in the North Sea and extracting [fossil fuels] doesn't mean you're good at solar or wind," someone familiar with the company's thinking said. "They are completely different businesses."

The Observer understands that Elliott carried out a "deep dive" into BP but decided the valuation wasn't cheap enough to compensate it for the risk. The firm decided not to invest – at that point at least.

Few people outside finance have heard of Elliott. But it has the power to alter the direction of businesses that affect millions of people. Founded in 1977 by Paul Singer, a major Republican donor, the firm's 622 employees are banned from posting pictures of themselves on social media – making most of them digital ghosts.

Elliott uses its huge resources – $76bn – to buy stock in companies it thinks are failing. The firm then pressures the companies to make changes, often in ways that critics say prioritise shareholder returns over longer-term objectives or public impacts such as combatting climate change.

Since 2020, the firm, which has a London office headed by Singer's son, Gordon, has built up stakes in numerous British companies including the bookseller Waterstones, pharmaceutical multinational GSK and restaurant chain Wasabi.

Elliott has also emerged as one of Thames Water's key creditors, helping put together a $10bn "rescue package" to save the beleaguered company from nationalisation. In return,

> *'Our optimism for a fast transition was misplaced, and we went too far, too fast'*
> *Murray Auchincloss in 2025*

Continued overleaf >>

How BP abandoned its green ambitions

Continued from page 11

the hedge fund and others have demanded that Ofwat, the water regulator, waives the right to enforce historic fines, a move that could see Thames avoid hundreds of millions of pounds in fines for sewage leaks and other infractions.

Former employees say Elliott is not driven by ideology and is laser focused on one thing: maximising returns – aka money. The firm does not manage any investments "designed to promote environmental and/or social characteristics" and does not employ anyone with a climate or ESG mandate.

"Unlike other firms where investors focus on 20 or 30 companies, at Elliott people are dedicating half their time to just one investment," one person who worked at the firm said. "It's a very intellectual, very analytical place to work."

It may be intellectual, but Elliott's reputation is fearsome. "They're absolute killers," one person who has worked on a transaction with the firm told *The Observer*. "If Elliott arrives on your share register, you absolutely shit your pants."

Elliot has been accused of employing private investigators to dig up dirt on board members at companies it wants to influence. In 2017 it was involved in an ugly fight with Arconic, a US industrial company into which the hedge fund had invested. Elliott pushed to oust Arconic's chief executive, Klaus Kleinfeld.

At the height of the dispute, private investigators allegedly knocked on Kleinfeld's neighbours' doors in Westchester County, New York, asking if Kleinfeld had loud parties or used drugs. The investigators said they were working on behalf of Arconic investors. Elliott would not comment on these allegations but it has said in the past it has changed the way it uses outside consultants, whose actions must now be cleared by Elliott's legal department.

BP may not have been the right fit for Elliott in 2021, but in 2024 the world looked very different. Concerns over green energy had been replaced by concerns over cost of living and energy prices. And BP – which had gone further than any other oil major in committing to green energy – started to look even more like an outlier. In 2024 its share price fell by 16%.

It was at this point that Gaurav Toshniwal, a portfolio manager at Elliott, started getting excited.

Toshniwal, based in Elliott Management's London offices on the sixth floor of a smart glass building off Marble Arch, thought the timing might be right to take a stake in the energy giant.

The Observer understands that the firm believed BP's undervaluation was now more profound than in 2021 and that it was more clear that the company's strategy wasn't working.

Toshniwal called John Pike, a tall southern Californian and an energy specialist who sits on Elliott's powerful investment committee.

Over the next month, a small team of analysts and outside advisers came on board to dig into BP from all angles. Eventually, Pike and Toshniwal took their plan to Elliott's investment committee, headed by the firm's founder, Paul Singer, and Elliott's co-chief executive officer, Jonathan Pollack. Gordon Singer is also on the committee.

Having got the go-ahead, Elliott used proxies to quietly start building up a stake in BP. The hedge fund used equity swaps – financial instruments – to build up a huge position today worth about £3.6bn, making the fund the second biggest investor behind BlackRock, ironically the asset manager owned by Larry Fink that had been so committed to net zero.

Last February, Elliott's involvement was outed by Bloomberg. It was only at this point, it is understood, that BP's management became aware of Elliott's involvement.

Gordon Singer with his father Paul, Elliott Management's founder. Getty

> *'They're absolute killers. If Elliott arrives on your share register, you shit your pants'*
> *Former Elliott collaborator*

By this time Looney had left BP, having been kicked out for failing to disclose details of personal relationships. But for Auchincloss, his successor, Elliott's arrival is unlikely to have been welcome. It signalled two things: that the market was giving up on net zero, and that Elliott would demand radical change from BP.

The firm saw Auchincloss as integrally bound up in Looney's failed reforms. He would have to work hard to bring the activist back on side.

The February pivot back to oil and gas did not cut it. "Murray has taken 18 months to come up with a three-year plan that's neither ambitious nor urgent," Elliott sources said at the time. Such was Elliott's influence that last month Auchincloss announced a review of its business, saying it now expects to cut 15% of its office staff.

Under pressure from the hedge fund, BP has replaced its chair, Helge Lund – the man who hired Looney and supported his plans to transform the company. Albert Manifold, the former boss of building materials producer CRH, is his successor.

"The firm has been encouraged by both the new chair and the change in tone from BP since August," someone familiar with Elliott said.

Many believe that fixing BP in the long-term will be tough. The company still pays out about $1.1bn a year in damages relating to the DeepWater Horizon oil spill in 2010, hampering its ability to invest. If it accedes to Elliott's demand to cut $10bn in costs it will have even less balance sheet flexibility to play with. Rumours of a takeover continue to grow.

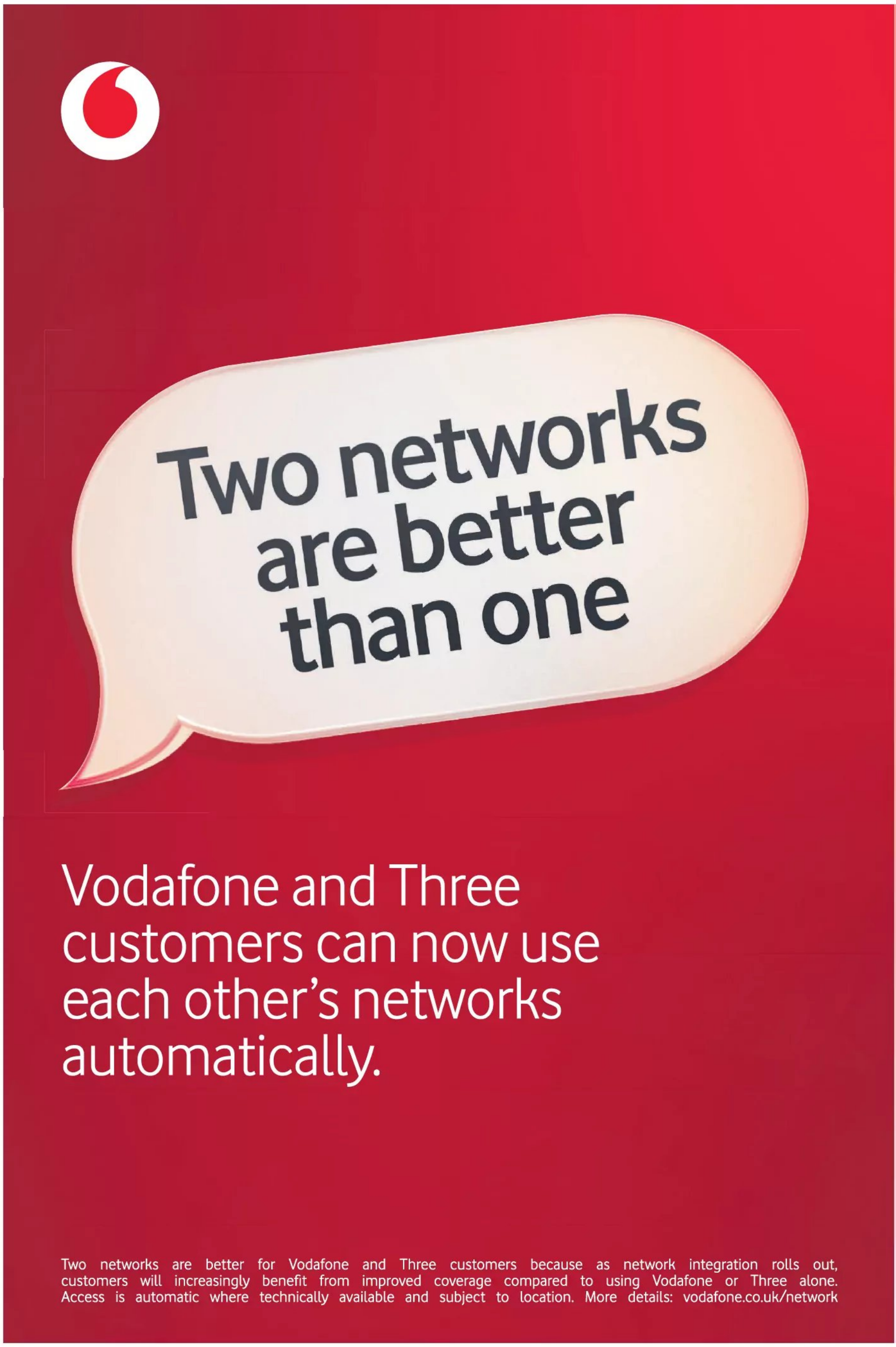
Five years ago, young people had much to worry about. House prices were soaring. Covid-19 was impacting millions of junior employees. But the main concern, as evidenced in multiple surveys, was the climate. In this respect, businesses and governments appeared to be listening. The world's biggest firms, even those that produced fossil fuels, promised they could be trusted to protect the planet.

Today, banks such as JPMorgan Chase and Goldman Sachs have exited the UN-backed net-zero banking alliance. According to the annual Banking on Climate Chaos survey, the world's biggest banks increased fossil fuel financing in 2024 for the first time since 2021, up by $162bn to $869bn.

Donald Trump's re-election in November shifted the political winds even further. In March, his energy secretary, Chris Wright, attracted cheers from oil executives when he told a conference that the world needed "more energy. Lots more energy".

One Swiss-based energy expert told me: "I was looking out of my window at a glacier that's half the size it was, listening to people whooping and hollering in delight."

Elliott Management and Looney both declined to comment.



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Fears as datacentres ‘fail to disclose water usage’

Jon Ungoed-Thomas

Datacentres intended to support AI are being allowed to draw hundreds of millions of litres of water from the ground in England, despite government advisers warning of a risk to the security of national supplies.

In January ministers announced dedicated growth zones to fast-track the construction of the powerful new datacentres required to power AI. There is now growing pressure for the centres to disclose the amount of water they are using.

England faces a shortfall of 5bn litres a day between available supplies and expected demand by 2055, according to Environment Agency (EA) figures. Thames Water has warned that some of the world’s biggest datacentres can consume up to 19m litres of water a day – the equivalent of supplying 50,000 homes.

A new generation of powerful datacentres will provide the infrastructure required for AI, housing the chips that can perform billions of calculations a second to answer online queries. These chips generate significant heat and require cooling with copious amounts of cold water or air.

Two of the largest datacentre providers, Equinix and Virtus, have already been granted licences to abstract water from ground supplies, according to environmental permits obtained by campaign group Foxglove under freedom of information rules. Equinix was granted a licence for a datacentre in Slough, Berkshire, to extract up to 72,000 litres of water an hour – or 1.7m litres a day – from ground supplies.

Donald Campbell, director of advocacy at Foxglove, said: “It’s alarming that the Environment Agency has been handing out licences for datacentres to extract hundreds of millions of litres of water from the environment – while failing to keep track of the total.”

The EU has introduced requirements for datacentres to disclose water usage, with the UK government facing calls for similar measures.

EA officials said water abstraction licences were granted only where the use of water is sustainable. They added that water consumption occurs in two main ways: indirectly through water used in electricity generation, which accounts for about 75% of the total, and directly for cooling computer components. The EA said: “We are working with the technology sector to understand their water needs and develop sustainable solutions, allowing important infrastructure, such as datacentres, to be supported.”

We totally agree

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Kane’s speciality: not winning for England. So why is he captain?

COMMENTARY

Giles Whittell

A funny thing happens about 76 seconds into a Harry Kane goals compilation viewed on YouTube by way of research for this article. He turns; swivels on his left foot, shoots with his right. Otherwise he’s always facing the same way, doing the same thing. Tapping it in and running to the corner flag pumping his arms like pistons, palms by his sides, face like thunder.

Kane scores like a metronome, but his real speciality is not winning tournaments for England, and there’s a tournament coming up. England played Andorra last night and play Serbia on Tuesday in World Cup qualifiers and Thomas Tuchel, the manager, has made it clear he wants Kane as captain and striker throughout.

So that’s it. The fix is in. What happens next is a lot of people call Kane a talisman and hope he leads the team to victory, and he doesn’t. If madness is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result, this is madness on grass. Or Xanax. There’s a sense the whole English football operation is on meds.

Kane fans: but he’s scored 73 times for his country and 280 for Spurs and 91 in 100 games for Bayern Munich and did you see that one he scored from behind his own halfway line?

The rest of us: yeah, but. Most of those England goals were against San Marino and the Faroes. See these toothmarks? They’re from chewing our knuckles when he wasn’t moving or scoring in last year’s Euros final. See this acronym – WTF? Nearly 30 million people to choose from and still Kane?

Harry Kane: ‘as inspirational as pesto pasta on a Sunday night’.

To win a World Cup takes magic and Kane doesn’t do magic. He does composure in the six-yard box. He seems to be a lovely guy with a lovely family but he’s as inspirational as pesto pasta on a Sunday night. He’s the Tim Peake of planet Earth. He makes time stand still, and not in a good way.

If we’re stuck with Kane we might as well be stuck in any of the even-numbered years of the past decade, not winning the Euros three times and the World Cup twice with Kane up front. It’s time for just about anyone else.

ON OTHER PAGES

The complicated legacy of Daniel Levy
Sport, page 8

Women’s Rugby World Cup: England v Australia
Sport, pages 10–11

Bike from the brink: on the road with the Tour of Britain
Sport, pages 16–17

The twins helping scientists break new ground

Genetically identical siblings can shed a unique light on the understanding of mitochondria and aid research into treatment

James Tapper

The rash Lucia Magee had on her hand was barely noticeable. “It was really just redness,” William, her father, said. “If she hadn’t been a twin, we might have just concluded she had red fingers.”

But the absence of the rash in Lucia’s identical twin sister, Isabella, made their parents suspicious.

Two years later, the five-year-olds have formed an important part of groundbreaking research at Great Ormond Street Hospital (Gosh) and University College London (UCL) that may help scientists unlock treatments for several illnesses, including Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s.

What the Magees now know is that Lucia has a rare muscle disease, one her genetically identical twin sister does not have.

The family had not heard of juvenile dermatomyositis (JDM), the illness Lucia was eventually diagnosed with. Few people have. It’s a rare autoimmune disease that is detected in about two in a million children each year. After the rash appears, it starts weakening muscles, so children seem more tired than usual.

“The reason it’s so serious is that a child can become extremely weak to the point where they can’t swallow properly,” said Lucy Wedderburn, a professor at UCL and a paediatric rheumatology consultant at Gosh.

If the condition is left untreated, it can harm the brain, lungs and gut, which, Wedderburn said, could even burst. For some children, JDM is fatal.

“As parents, naturally you start googling,” William Magee said. “And it freaked us out – stories of children waking up and being unable to move. But we somehow stumbled across the right doctors to get a diagnosis.”

The treatment for JDM is a course of steroids combined with other drugs to stop the body’s immune system from attacking itself. This is enough for some children to recover, but for others, the disease returns.

Wedderburn and her colleagues are working with 705 families that have experienced JDM, in a group funded by Versus Arthritis, Myositis UK, Gosh Charity, the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Chernajovsky Foundation and the George Bessell DFM Trust.

A new gene technique known as spatial transcriptomics has revealed part of the answer. The method enables biomedical researchers to examine single cells. The team used it to look at the muscle cells of Lucia and other children to identify which genes were active. They discovered a new issue: the cells’ mitochondria were not working properly.

“Mitochondria are the energy-producing components of all cells in the body,” said research fellow Meredyth Wilkinson, who led the project. “What was striking was a dysfunctional signature of some genes that were related to the energy output from mitochondria. It really opens up a body of evidence that shows we need to be targeting these mitochondria.”

Discovering that the mitochondria were not providing energy to the children’s muscles helps explain why they became weaker.

Mitochondria are a biological curiosity. Scientists believe that they may have been independent organisms that were absorbed, during the course of evolution, by other cells. They have their own DNA, separate from the nucleus in human cells, which is only transmitted through the mother.

This may explain why Lucia has JDM but Isabella does not.

“The mitochondria, even in identical twins, won’t be identical at the very first cell split,” Wedderburn said. When a fertilised egg splits into two, the mitochondria are divided between the eggs.

TOP
The Magee twins, aged five, and above, how Lucia’s hands looked shortly after she started treatment.

That means it is possible that Lucia received mitochondria from her mother that her twin sister did not, and her mitochondrial DNA are responsible for her JDM.

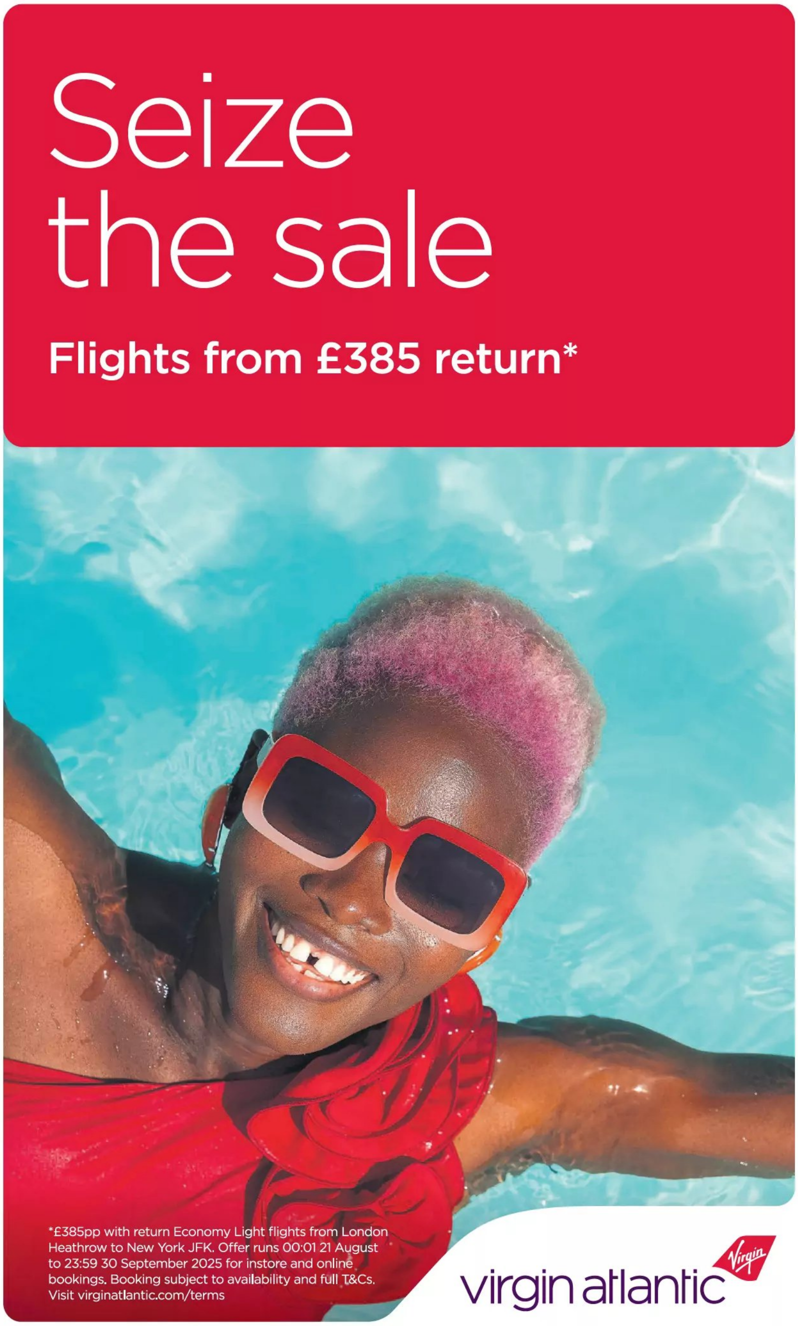
Alternatively, something may have happened later, with Lucia encountering something that triggered the disease while her sister did not. “The environment impacts on your genes and how they work,” Wedderburn said. “Food, infections, your gut. Gradually you acquire differences, especially in your immune system.

“Very rare neurological diseases start with a problem in a mitochondrial gene. And probably many other diseases, such as Alzheimer’s. There’s interest in this kind of interaction right across lots of diseases.”

The aim now is to establish whether existing drugs might be able to treat the mitochondrial dysfunction in JDM. One candidate is N-acetyl cysteine, or Nac, which is used to reverse the damage caused by taking too much paracetamol. The next stage for Wedderburn and Wilkinson is to develop a blood test that can detect the dysfunction.

The Magees are hoping Lucia will not need it. So far she has responded well to treatment, which includes steroids and plasma transfusions of intravenous immunoglobulin.

“Six months in, things have started to quiet down,” William said. “Lucia is essentially symptom-free. We hope to stop the hospital visits next year.”



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RIGHT
Patrick Friedman: 'My life's mission is to start new countries, like we start companies.'
Katie Hayes Luke /The Observer

New genes: the millionaire guinea pigs risking death to live for ever

Firms offering untested 'longevity' jabs and therapies were once based in offshore free zones. Now a US state is relaxing the rules, writes *Patricia Clarke*

Patrick Friedman is no stranger to medical experimentation. Early last year, the American investor and grandson of the Nobel prize-winning economist Milton Friedman had all of the bacteria in his mouth replaced in an attempt to permanently prevent cavities. He has a microchip embedded in his hand that operates as both a Tesla key and a business card.

On the Caribbean island of Roatán, Honduras, Friedman has now tested a new medicine, a single injection that promises to "increase lean muscle mass and decrease fat", pitched as a way to slow ageing and extend a person's healthy years – what the industry calls "longevity".

The therapy was designed by a company called Minicircle, a startup based between the US and Honduras, where it operates outside the confines of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Friedman, speaking over Zoom, was clear this was a riskier intervention: "I was like: 'Wow, I'm going to inject something with new DNA into my body.' I wouldn't blame anyone else for not being comfortable with it." Friedman is in the vanguard of the longevity libertarians, setting up projects offshore in "free zones" in order to escape the regulation that they see not as a means of protecting people, but as a constraint on innovation and the potential of humanity.

Their pursuit of eternal life is reshaping legislation in the US, too. In May, the state of Montana broadened its right-to-try legislation, which since 2014 has allowed terminally ill patients to access treatments that have not yet gained FDA approval. Now, otherwise healthy patients will be able to apply to try unproven longevity medicines.

Proponents say it is an exciting way for private companies to carry out potentially life-saving research at speed, bypassing an outdated and overly bureaucratic FDA. Critics say that it is only a matter of time "before something really bad happens".

In 2008, Friedman founded the Seasteading Institute, an organisation aiming to build extrajudicial communities in international waters. "My life's mission is to... start new countries, like we start companies today," he said.

He moved his project ashore in 2013, when the Honduran government passed a law to create special economic areas called Zedes (zones for employment and economic development). Four years later, he invested in the project that became Próspera, a startup city in Roatán, where companies can write their own regulatory rules. Since then, Próspera has raised more than $100m in investments and is home to everything from a subdermal implants lab promising to make "human cyborgs", to a centre specialising in stem-cell therapies that are not approved in the US.

Minicircle is one of the island's most prominent businesses. It was founded in 2019 by Tristan Roberts, Walter Patterson and Mac Davis – a group of baby-faced biohackers who met while working at a gene-therapy company called Ascendance Biomedical, which collapsed in 2018 after its founder was found dead in a sensory deprivation tank.

At Minicircle, they pivoted to a gene therapy that targets the muscle-building protein follistatin. Riding the early crest of the longevity trend, they raised a modest investment, including money from high-profile backers such as Palantir co-founder Peter Thiel ($150,000) and OpenAI's chief executive, Sam Altman ($250,000).

One of the many benefits of operating the business from Próspera is that it speeds up the clinical trial process and makes it significantly cheaper. On average, in the US, it takes more than 10 years for a drug to go from phase 1 testing to regulatory approval, and estimates for the average cost of developing a new drug range from roughly $985m to $2.6bn. "Próspera seemed like a good option for doing it with almost no budget," said Minicircle co-founder Roberts.

> ***'These guys are playing with fire. It's only a matter of time before something really bad happens'***
> ***Senior longevity scientist***

LEFT
Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal, and the OpenAI boss Sam Altman have invested in Minicircle.

In August 2023, the company designed a phase 1 follistatin trial with 43 participants, based in Roatán. Roberts described it as a success.

In April 2024, Minicircle self-published a paper that called follistatin gene therapy "a potentially safe, anti-frailty longevity therapy".

Mark Kay, a professor of paediatrics and genetics at Stanford University, California, reviewed the paper and said much of the data shown in the study's charts was "meaningless" and the follistatin dose administered to patients was tiny.

"If this was a real therapy that could really do what they claim, the pharmaceutical companies would be all over it," Kay said. *The Observer* has spoken to several scientists who are similarly sceptical about Minicircle's follistatin claims.

But by 2024, the therapy was on sale in Próspera for $25,000, without moving on to phase 2 testing to prove the treatment's efficacy in fighting disease. Because the laws of Próspera allowed them to, the company went straight to commercialising the treatment instead.

Minicircle is now expanding. This year, it launched a new website, it is hiring for a series of roles and it is advertising a new product, klotho, which is due out in 2026. On its website, Minicircle calls klotho a "life-extension gene therapy known for its broad health and cognition benefits", saying it improves brain plasticity. Friedman, however, said the company is yet to carry out its phase 1 trials.

Several doctors and scientists studying genetics and longevity, including research into klotho, told *The Observer* that it is a highly experimental treatment and there is no data supporting its effects on humans.

"Honestly, I think these guys are playing with fire, and it's only a matter of time before something really bad happens," said one senior longevity scientist. "Or it may have happened already, and we just don't know about it." It can take years for some side-effects of treatments to become apparent.

Friedman is unconcerned about both the risks and the lack of evidence for these treatments, and feels sure Minicircles's follistatin treatment worked for him. Ultimately, he said that "people have to make their own decisions".

More and more people will now be able to follow Friedman's lead into the world of medical self-experimentation.

In Montana, as part of the new right-to-try legislation, all medicines will have to go through a phase 1 safety trial, but after that, the bill offers a shortcut to the next step, which is testing whether a drug actually works. About 85% of drugs that clear phase 1 still fail in later stages. Experts say that giving such drugs to healthy people risks blurring the line between research and medicine.

For now, the Montana project is embryonic; no companies have set up shop there yet. But the kinds of ventures already operating offshore point to what might come next.

Additional reporting by Madeline Parr

British identity is complex – it can't be neatly tied in red, white and blue

The current debate over what it means to fly the national flag is not as important as the common values we want to ascribe to it

Kenan Malik

About 10 years ago we stayed in a cottage in Littondale, a beautiful valley in the Yorkshire Dales. The first night, we went for a drink at the local. It was plastered inside and out with union jacks. The moment I saw the flags, the hairs on my neck stood up.

Anyone black or Asian who had grown up in 1970s and 80s Britain would probably have felt the same. The union jack in those days was a sign meaning "enemy territory". You found union jacks mainly on National Front marches and National Front pubs. "There ain't no black in the union jack, send the fucking bastards back" was a common football terrace chant.

Littondale in the 2010s was, of course, a very different place from Manchester in the 1970s or east London in the 80s. The meaning of the union jack has transformed, too.

The pub was welcoming and friendly, and we returned there more than once. It was symbol of how much Britain has changed over the past half century.

Signs and symbols are essential to our lives, helping us navigate the social world and providing a means of signifying who we are and what we stand for. The meaning of any symbol, though, is often contested. Someone wearing a Palestinian keffiyeh might view it as an act of solidarity with the people of Gaza; others might see it as an expression of Jew hatred. A woman wearing a hijab might think of it as demonstrating her belongingness to her faith and culture. Others, including many Muslim women, regard it as a symbol of their oppression, a tawdry reminder of the second-class status women possess in many Muslim communities.

This contestation of meaning is why there has been such a fierce debate over Operation Raise the Colours, the movement to fly the national flag and to paint the cross of St George on walls and roundabouts that, since its beginnings in Birmingham, has spread across England, from Plymouth to Newcastle.

For many of the flaggers, and many of the commentators, it is a refreshing and overdue expression of patriotism. The shadow justice secretary, Robert Jenrick, welcomed it as the movement of "patriotic Britons... to put out our flags and restore pride in our country".

"The English nation is astir," one academic believes.

Operation Raise the Colours did not, though, emerge from nowhere and is defined by the conflicts and contradictions that are shaping today's Britain. Two developments are particularly important in fuelling the movement. The first is the broken social contract and the sense, within many sections of the working

Operation Raise the Colours is defined by the contradictions that are shaping today's Britain

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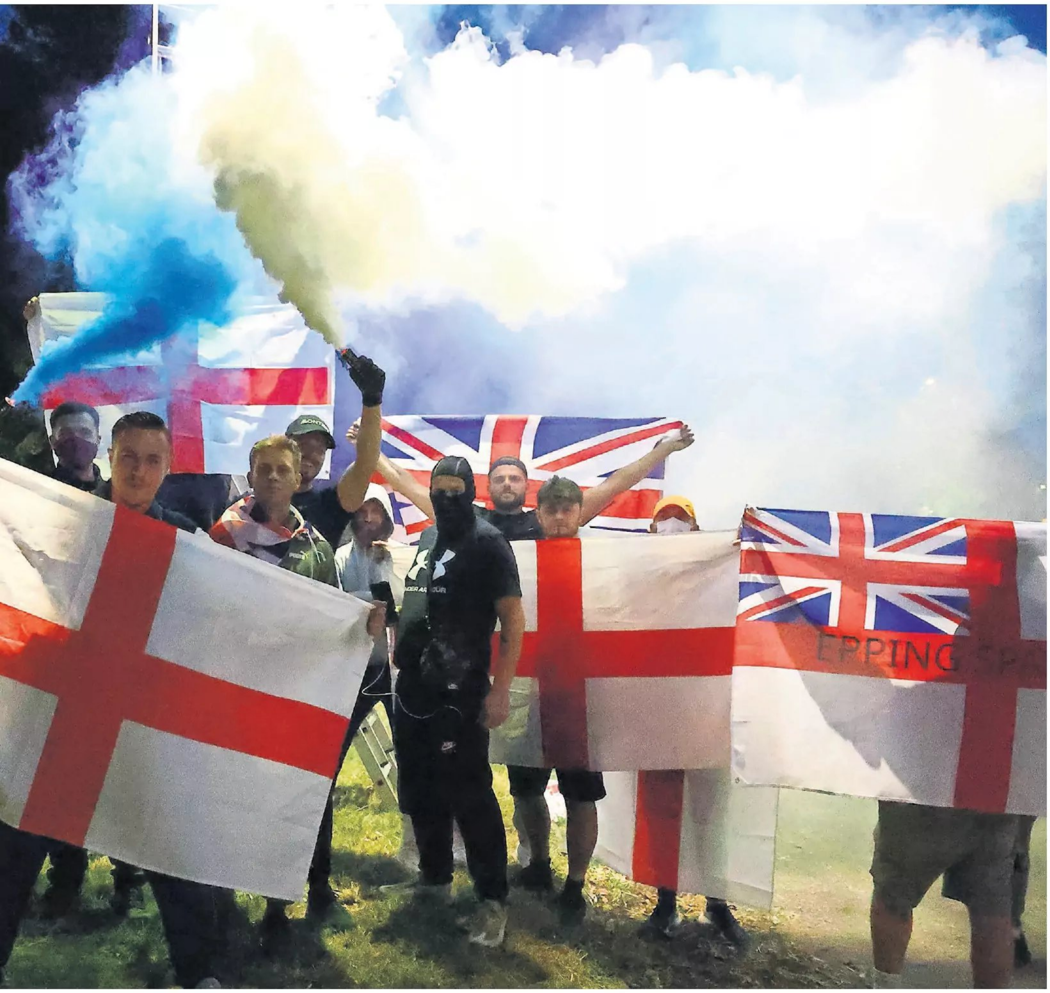
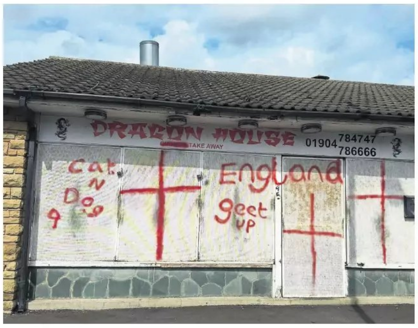


LEFT
A group calling itself the East Herts Flag Ninjas in Hertford.
Jacqueline Lawrie/LNP



ABOVE
A Chinese takeaway is vandalised with St George's Cross graffiti.

class, of betrayal by successive governments that have failed to address questions of falling living standards and the depredations of the "flexible" labour market; of entrenched poverty and slashed benefits; of a dearth of decent housing and a decades-long failure to build; of public services that no longer function and of private services that are merely rapacious; of a lack of accountability of public officials and private corporations, even for terrible misdeeds. All of which has been exacerbated by a sense of abandonment by the organisations that once gave voice, even if in a limited and distorted way, to working-class aspirations, from the Labour party to trade unions.

Whereas this sense of betrayal and abandonment has been nurtured over many decades, the second development has emerged much more recently: the fraying of social norms that for much of the last seven decades has kept racism in check. Ideas, particularly in the context of immigration, that not so long ago were solely in the province of the far right – talk of mass deportations, of "remigration", of migrants as "invaders", of white people as losing their homeland, of ethnic notions of national identity – have seeped into mainstream political conversation.

"From Epping to the sea, let's make England Abdul free," tweeted Douglas Carswell, the former Tory and Ukip MP who now runs a US thinktank. What is striking about such bigotry is not just that Carswell should casually spout the language of the BNP but that he should be so comfortable in doing so. It shows how far the boundaries of the acceptable have moved in recent years. "Good news. The Overton window is moving and we are helping move it," Matthew Goodwin, the academic turned Reform propagandist, gleefully announced. It is a claim echoed by many on the right.

Named after an American political analyst, the Overton window is a term used to describe the ideas and arguments politically acceptable to mainstream society at any particular time. And yes, it is shifting. But the fact that arguments that once belonged to the far right are now seen as mainstream, and the growing assertion of casual bigotry, is hardly something to celebrate. Britain has not regressed back to the racial landscape of half a century ago. Most people still hold to liberal norms about racism, still view their black or brown neighbours or workmates as English or British. What has changed, though, is that racists, both online and in the physical world, have become far less inhibited in flaunting their bigotry.

It is the collision of these two developments that explains why immigrants have become symbolic of what is wrong with Britain and why discontent has become expressed through anti-migrant riots and protests outside hotels housing asylum seekers.

Against this background, it is naive to view the raising the colours movement simply as a proclamation of patriotism. For some, it is certainly a means of asserting a sense of pride and belonging that can sorely be lacking in today's Britain. For others, though, it is an act of provocation against the "liberal elite", against "woke" attitudes and against the presence of minorities.

For others still, it provides an occasion to mock minorities and to physically attack people, homes and businesses. From the racist vandalism of a Chinese takeaway in York to the abuse hurled at a Muslim mother and her child by men painting St George's flags on other people's properties in Basildon, from the racist graffiti ("Keep the dirty Muslims out the villages" and "Child rapists") painted on walls alongside St George's crosses in Bishop Auckland, County Durham, and "Fuck Pakis" on a bus stop, to the "This is England" vandalism of the South Essex Islamic Centre, flags have become a platform for overt bigotry. They have become as much about marking out territory and defining who does not belong as they are about national pride.

"In England," George Orwell wrote in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, "all the boasting and flag-wagging, the 'Rule Britannia' stuff, is done by small minorities. The patriotism of the common people is not vocal or even conscious." Those who simply insist that "flag wagging" today is merely a patriotic movement or an assertion of national identity are, just as in the immigration debate, opening the way for the racists to become even more aggressive.

A flag may signal an attachment to a nation or an identity, but what it means to be British or English is not fixed but continually challenged and changeable. The different threads that make up Britishness and Englishness do not come neatly packaged up in red, white and blue ribbons.

There are many aspects of British life that I admire and many that I despise. There are many British traditions that resonate with me and many that I find abhorrent. There are many moments of British history that bring a lump to my throat and many that make me shudder. And that is surely true of most Britons.

There is a rich tapestry of conflicting ideas and visions that make up English and British history, culture and identity. Britain is the nation of the Levellers, the Suffragettes and the Shrewsbury 21. It is also the nation of Robert Knox, Cecil Rhodes and Lord Rothermere. To be English or British is to engage with this richness of contradictions, to wrestle with the ambiguities, not distil it down to a single set of meanings. A flag may symbolise a sense of belonging to a national identity, but it can also be used to erase the complexities of that identity.

Forty years ago, I was an angry young man knocking on the door of a nation uncomfortable with my presence. I have since grown to be at ease with my Britishness and Britain, though it may be beginning to change, with me. What links the old me to the current me is an insistence that common values are important but that these can emerge only through political contestation and struggle.

It is not so much in "flag wagging" as in the struggle over the values we want to define us that we find common meaning.

WNE PLAZA
LONDON HEATHROW
English
rogressive ness o
ENGLAND

FROM FAR LEFT
Competing layers of graffiti are painted outside a west London hotel used to accommodate migrants. A house in West Auckland, County Durham, displays a St George's cross.
Leon Neal/Getty, Gary Calton/ The Observer

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World

‘Russia improves its weapons, we improve ours. Progress moves fast, but it comes with a high cost in lives’

→ *Drones over Ukraine, page 22*

In a show of power, China’s strange bedfellows signal a new world order

After two striking images in China, *Rana Mitter* asks whether we’ve just witnessed the start of the Asian century

Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, and Xi Jinping at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting in Tianjin. UPI/Alamy

Last Wednesday Tiananmen Square in Beijing hosted a massive parade. The event commemorated the 80th anniversary of the end of the second world war in Asia. But with hundreds of lethal weapons complementing the thousands of soldiers marching in perfect formation it was also an advertisement for China’s new military confidence – a strong contrast with the weakness that allowed Japan to invade the country in 1937.

Although Japan was defeated in 1945 by an alliance of the United States, the British empire and China, the history they commemorated was distinctly Asia-focused and the key leaders who came to the ceremony were almost all Asian. The presence of Vladimir Putin prevented any senior Americans or Europeans attending, but it didn’t prevent him being feted by Xi Jinping, with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un making up a trio.

The eclipse of America’s war record and the rise of Asia’s narrative in the second world war seems to foreshadow a new prominence for Asia’s role in global politics. The parade came just days after another striking geopolitical troika when Putin was greeted by Xi and Indian premier Narendra Modi at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting in the northern Chinese city of Tianjin.

These two events – producing two striking images – have led some to question whether this was the week that the Asian century truly began.

The retreat from liberal values in much of the west has given Asia’s agnosticism about politics freer rein. Asia still maintains liberal democracies (South Korea, Taiwan), less liberal ones (India, Indonesia) and authoritarian states (China, Vietnam). But Asia’s leaders do not criticise each other on internal governance. The celebration of the second world war in Beijing may have referenced anti-fascism, but it was certainly not a celebration of the triumph of democracy.

Instead, last week suggests that Asia may be at the heart of new partnerships. The picture of Modi, Xi and Putin together is in some ways the mirror image of the encounter between Nixon and Mao in 1972, when the US managed to become closer to a China that was at odds with the USSR. This time round, the odd couple is Modi and Xi, whose geopolitical friction is very real, but who deliberately chose to take a photo opportunity with each other along with Putin as a way of reminding the US that Asia’s rising powers have options other than the west.

This increasing geopolitical assertiveness comes in part from Asia’s growing centrality to the world’s economic future.

Some 50% of global GDP is in Asia, and the IMF projects regional growth of nearly 4% in the near future. The effect of the new Trump tariffs is not yet clear, but they may have the effect of making trade less global and more regional. Asian countries may form even deeper supply chains with China, which is already the major trading partner of almost every country in the region.

The Trump tariffs may have the effect of making trade less global and more regional

One factor above all may shape it in the next few years: energy. Geopolitics was also shaped by energy in the 1970s, but half a century ago it was a battle over just one fuel, oil. Trump’s energy policy is much more about a fork in the road: the US will return to fossil fuels, leaving green energy to develop elsewhere. And China, perhaps to its surprise, has been left in the EV driver’s seat when it comes to solar, wind, and even nuclear energy. After all, many of the growing economies in south and south-east Asia are also the countries most vulnerable to climate change. They need to pacify an emerging middle class with aspirations to better jobs and a more consumerist lifestyle. They also need to ensure that hurricanes, typhoons and other weather patterns that threaten the region don’t become worse.

The Trump administration’s answer to their energy hunger is that they should buy more US-produced gas and oil: the US has recently pressured India to stop buying so much from Russia. Asian nations won’t stop buying fossil fuels any time soon. But they will want bigger solar farms and more wind turbines, and now they will get them from China. China itself will continue to be a major emitter of carbon. However, it has recently announced a big new hydropower plant in Tibet, which may yet cause friction over water supply with India and other countries downstream, but is a sign that China intends to dominate what it calls “ecological civilisation”.

This idea seeks not only to shift over time toward renewable energy, but to associate it with a wider moral message, particularly resonant in the global south, about dealing with climate change. The Biden administration’s misleadingly titled Inflation Reduction Act was in large part an incentive to create green energy capacity in the US for use in the democratic world; much of the plan has been cancelled under Trump. Unless Europe steps in as a major manufacturer of green

Continued overleaf >>

>> Continued from page 19

energy technology, China is likely to dominate that sector for decades as an authoritarian near-monopolist on a major global public good. China has a good chance of dominating the struggle for energy generation for years, maybe decades. Why will Asia need to generate so much power? The newest technologies will demand it: as more of daily life in the 2020s and 2030s involves AI, the huge, power-hungry data farms needed to support it will become a key part of debates on energy and data sovereignty.

Meanwhile, Europe is in a bind. The famed German manufacturing sector is faltering and its longstanding success at selling cars into China's immense market has crumbled as homegrown EV brands such as BYD have become dominant. In AI and 5G, China continues to dominate the field as Europe fails to innovate. As the US withdraws funding from some key areas of biotech, such as mRNA vaccines, Chinese influence will continue to grow in key pharmaceutical fields.

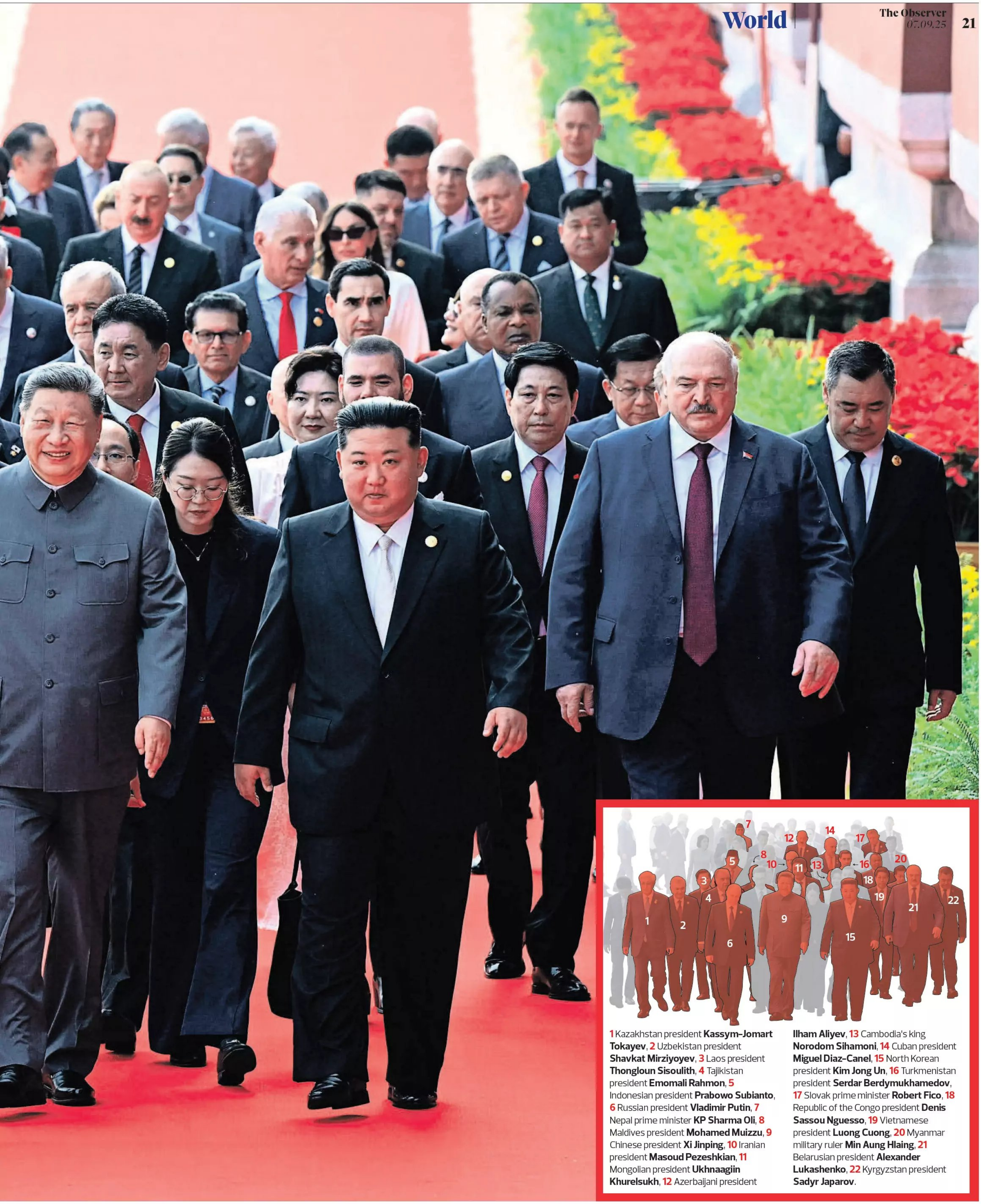
However, underlying geopolitics will still place obstacles in the way of Asia's giants cooperating on economics. Despite Modi's recent friendly encounter with Xi, India and China remain wary of each other. The dispute between the two countries over the border in the Himalayas is a reminder that there are potential conflicts just under the surface across the region.

Asia has been broadly peaceful for years. But there is no automatic reason that this will remain the case. In the early cold war, conflicts broke out in Korea and Indochina, and even in recent years there have been small-scale but deadly confrontations between India and Pakistan. Today, the fear of war is greater than a generation ago. Xi has indicated his desire to "resolve" the Taiwan issue by unifying the island with the mainland. A full-scale invasion remains unlikely, particularly if the US remains steadfast in its willingness to offer support for the democratic island. But it is not unthinkable, and the cost to the world economy would be devastating: one report places it at $10tn.

The economic prosperity of Asia is dependent on complex supply chains, financial flows and overall predictability. A war would blast those assumptions into pieces, triggering not just a regional but a global recession. Nuclear brinkmanship by North Korea, or in south Asia, or a naval confrontation in the heavily-travelled South China sea might all have the same effect.

The parade in Beijing marked the end of a conflict that devastated Asia eight decades ago. Today, the region is coming of age as a driver of global economic and technological growth, as well as increasing geopolitical heft. But if they want an Asian century, its leaders will have to do much more to prioritise peace.

Rana Mitter is ST Lee Chair in US-Asia Relations at the Harvard Kennedy School and author of China's *Good War: How World War II is Shaping a New Nationalism*



1 Kazakhstan president **Kassym-Jomart Tokayev**, **2** Uzbekistan president **Shavkat Mirziyoyev**, **3** Laos president **Thongloun Sisoulith**, **4** Tajikistan president **Emomali Rahmon**, **5** Indonesian president **Prabowo Subianto**, **6** Russian president **Vladimir Putin**, **7** Nepal prime minister **KP Sharma Oli**, **8** Maldives president **Mohamed Muizzu**, **9** Chinese president **Xi Jinping**, **10** Iranian president **Masoud Pezeshkian**, **11** Mongolian president **Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh**, **12** Azerbaijani president **Ilham Aliyev**, **13** Cambodia's king **Norodom Sihamoni**, **14** Cuban president **Miguel Diaz-Canel**, **15** North Korean president **Kim Jong Un**, **16** Turkmenistan president **Serdar Berdymukhamedov**, **17** Slovak prime minister **Robert Fico**, **18** Republic of the Congo president **Denis Sassou Nguesso**, **19** Vietnamese president **Luong Cuong**, **20** Myanmar military ruler **Min Aung Hlaing**, **21** Belarusian president **Alexander Lukashenko**, **22** Kyrgyzstan president **Sadyr Japarov**.

A buzz, silence, a blue light... then utter devastation. The lethal Russian drones wreaking havoc in Ukraine

Citizens fall asleep every night to the constant hum of killing machines that turn buildings to dust and snuff out lives. In a sunflower field near Kyiv, *Liz Cookman* witnesses the hi-tech race to stop the carnage

The sound of drones is now so common in Kyiv that some joke darkly that it's part of their bedtime routine. Locals liken the sound to flying lawnmowers, motorcycles in the sky or construction work during the night.

"The noise lasts for hours and it drives you mad," said Svitlana Kuksa, 48, a resident of the Darnytskyi district who lost her home in a huge drone attack in July.

This summer, Ukraine has endured aerial attacks at a scale unseen since Russia invaded in 2022. In July alone, 6,200 Shahed-type drones were unleashed, more than during any previous month. It was also the deadliest month for civilians in more than three years.

Last month, another 23 people were killed in the capital in the second largest attack of the war, while 60,000 were left without electricity after power facilities were hit in the country's north and south on Sunday. President Volodymyr Zelensky vowed to retaliate by ordering more strikes on infrastructure deep inside Russia.

The need for a ceasefire is more urgent than ever, yet peace talks between Ukraine, Russia and the US have hit a deadlock since last month's Alaska summit. During a visit to China last week, President Vladimir Putin suggested peace talks could be held in Moscow, but Ukraine rejected the idea as "intentionally unacceptable".

European leaders are concerned that Russia will mount a new offensive now that 100,000 soldiers have been relocated to the frontline outside the embattled city of Pokrovsk, in the Donetsk region.

The bombardment of Ukraine's cities is only likely to worsen as autumn approaches – previous years have seen Russia target infrastructure, cutting off electricity to pressure civilians into submission. Moscow has also increased drone production – it is now able to produce as many Shahed and Garpiya drones in three days as it could in a month last year, according to Ukrainian and western intelligence. Some estimates say Russia will be able to strike Ukraine with 2,000 drones a night by November. The largest attack so far, in early July, involved 728 drones and 13 missiles.

Like the Iranian-designed Shahed, the newer Garpiya – made with Chinese parts – can deliver explosive payloads. Both are also used as decoys to overwhelm Ukrainian air defence systems, to pave the way for more expensive, often more destructive missiles. Kyiv says Russia's ballistic missile production has increased by at least 66% over the past year.

Without a peace deal, Ukraine will need to innovate continuously to protect its population from both the increasing size of Russia's attacks and the growing sophistication of its weapons. Kyiv is racing to secure more western systems such as Patriots and Iris-Ts, while also adapting homemade drones and mobile air defences to fill the gap.

At a secret location among sunflower and wheat fields near Kyiv, a voluntary mobile air defence team practises on a makeshift firing range. Teams like this are the frontline of defence for Ukraine's cities, part of a network of air defence that works round the clock to intercept drones and missiles before they can reach homes and infrastructure.

"This is not a trench war like the second world war but a war of technology," said the chief of staff of a mobile air defence unit in the Kyiv region who goes by the call-sign Mavka, 39. "Russia improves their weapons, we improve ours. Progress moves fast in war, but it comes with a high cost in lives."

The Shahed drones have evolved since they were first used in September 2022. They used to fly at low altitudes to avoid radar detection but now operate at more than 3,000 metres, out of range of anti-aircraft machine guns. They fly faster and change their trajectory in flight.

"Every drone we down, we study to see what has changed. They use new materials, new devices, add more explosives," said Mavka.

With a warhead upgraded from 40kg to 90kg, Shaheds now hold enough explosives to "destroy a whole building". "That's partly why civilian casualties have risen," she said.

In the first half of this year, 6,754 civilians were killed or injured – a 54% rise from the same period in 2024, according to the UN human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine.

Mavka's Pereiaslav volunteer territorial defence unit combines old and new technology to fight the evolving threat – they downed two drones the night before we speak at their base and are called to their stations by sirens as soon as we finish. Browning machine guns from the 1940s sit alongside modern telescopic night-vision lenses and iPad radar apps. Yet they face increasing personal risk: the drones can now be loaded with thermobaric warheads which ignite massive fireballs and pressure waves, chemical payloads and delayed explosives.

To combat the ever-larger waves of drones, they say they need interceptor drones – a relatively new technology that is low-cost and low-risk. Some types of interceptors have been in use since last year, but the technology is improving quickly. They are fast and lightweight, they hunt targets in mid-air and some are equipped with warheads or use nets to physically trap and bring down enemy drones.

They have a high rate of success in tests when it comes to taking down Shahed or Garpiya drones. Zelensky ordered the rapid production of 1,000 interceptor drones a day in late July to regain the defensive edge. "We won't be able to stop the attacks completely when we have them, but we can reduce the damage," Mavka said.

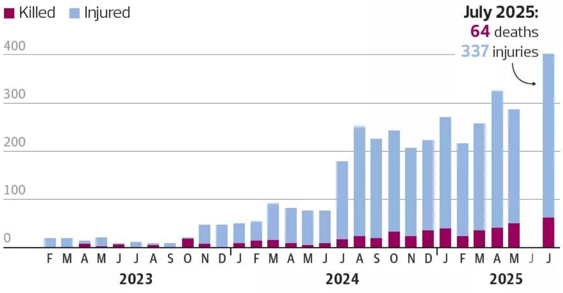
Nowhere is this cycle of action and counteraction starker than at Unwave, a drone and electronic warfare facility at another secret location near Kyiv. They say it takes Russia three months to catch up with new developments, and vice versa.

Electronic warfare systems jam or hijack enemy signals, providing cover for troops and infrastructure. At the front, the prevalence of first-person-view drones, which kill more soldiers and destroy more equipment on both sides than any other weapons system in the war, has made most vehicle movement impossible. Each brigade has its own electronic warfare division, with the systems portable, on car roof racks and even in backpacks.

"Going anywhere near the front now without one of these would be like a soldier going to a trench without a helmet or flak jacket – a suicide mission," said Taras, product manager at the electronic warfare facility.

While early work at Unwave relied on Chinese components, now almost everything is produced domestically. The factory made 500 drones a month in 2023 and is now reported to produce 5,000, doubling output since the start of the year. Drones have helped Ukraine be self-reliant amid

Civilian casualties from short-range drone attacks in Ukraine



Source: UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. Data unavailable for Jun 2025

ABOVE Emergency workers in Kyiv search for survivors after a Russian drone attack on a residential building . Getty

'Each drone we down, we study to see what has changed. They use new materials, add more explosives'

Mavka, mobile air defence unit chief

western ammunition shortages and adapt to an evolving battlefield. This has transformed the country into the world's largest producer of tactical and long-range unmanned vehicles, says Ukraine's defence minister.

Taras believes Ukraine can keep innovating fast enough to keep pace, but the main threat is economic. If Europe or the US cuts financial support, research and development could stall. "We don't have the luxury of spending years on research and funding – we have a few months," he said. "But this should not be seen as a disadvantage. It is an important driver."

The cost of failure can be seen in attacks such as the one in July that made Kuksa homeless. She recalled the night her home was destroyed as people ran from apartments that were soon reduced to rubble. More than 300 drones overwhelmed air defence systems before two missile strikes destroyed her building.

"The attack started with drones and I hid in the corridor," said Kuksa. "At 3.30am I was so tired I went to bed, but there was an odd silence. Then I saw a bright light from the window. I thought I must have already died."

Thirty-two people, including five children, were killed that night. "So many children died – why am I still alive? I don't understand why we couldn't stop the enemy. Our western partners should have helped us equip ourselves better so we can protect our people."

Revolution 2.0: France's political future could be won or lost by bots and memes

The country's PM is set to lose power tomorrow, but what happens next is being shaped online, say analysts

Kim Willsher
Paris

The fate of the French prime minister will be decided in the national assembly tomorrow, when François Bayrou and his centre-right government will almost certainly lose a confidence vote.

But the future of the country will be shaped elsewhere – online and on the streets. Over the summer, two opposing campaigns have emerged on social media to amplify the voices of ordinary voters. "C'est Nicolas qui paie" (Nicolas picks up the bill) began as a rightwing meme: a white-collar worker pictured with his head in his hands, virtual Nicolas despaired of paying high taxes to fund what he viewed as a nanny state.

The idea was that his taxes were going towards benefits for migrants and for pensioners to go on cruises while he was getting nothing back.

The meme became a movement. Conservative and far-right politicians have cautiously adopted Nicolas. Anxious not to alienate cruising pensioners – boomers are key supporters of Les Républicains and Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (National Rally) – they have leaned into the anti-immigration rhetoric in which the fictional Nicolas finances the benefits of the fictional "Karim".

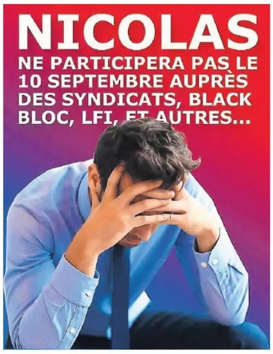
Bruno Retailleau, France's rightwing interior minister, has said that Nicolas embodies the sense of injustice felt by part of the population. "It's the France of honest people who pay their taxes, who work ... who don't make a fuss, not because they have nothing to say but because politicians often don't care," said Retailleau to a political thinktank last month.

"This is what I call the silent majority. They feel a sense of injustice because it is Nicolas who always pays."

On the left, the Bloquons Tout (Block Everything) movement has also evolved from an online campaign, this time to hasten economic and political collapse in France by paralysing the country.

The campaign emerged on Telegram and Signal networks in May from a citizens' collective in northern France calling itself "the Essentials". The campaign has since spread over X, TikTok, Facebook and Signal, and has been hailed as the new *gilets jaunes* movement, in reference to the wave of popular but increasingly violent yellow-vest protests that swept France in the two years before Covid.

According to analysts at Visibrain, which monitors social networks, there are signs the Bloquons Tout hashtag was artificially amplified with astroturfing, whereby fake accounts or bots publish thousands of messages a day to boost content.


NICOLAS
NE PARTICIPERA PAS LE 10 SEPTEMBRE AUPRÈS DES SYNDICATS, BLACK BLOC, LFI, ET AUTRES...

'Nicolas' (above) is the symbol of a popular rightwing meme, and a gilets jaunes protester (top) in Paris, 2018.

But the political scientist Antoine Bristielle, a director at the Jean-Jaurès Foundation thinktank, said its recent report profiling supporters of Bloquons Tout had found they were overwhelmingly young, highly educated, reasonably well-off and supporters of the radical left.

Bristielle said both online movements were seeking to revolutionise France, not through traditional street marches and protests but as social and political social media influencers.

"They hope that by getting enough support on social media, they can bring about change," Bristielle said. "The common characteristic of both is that they were born outside of the political parties. Usually, it is the parties that express their vision of society, but social networks allow the people to express their political visions."

'Social networks allow the people to express their political visions'

Antoine Bristielle, analyst

Bloquons Tout will try to shift the movement to the streets this week, announcing its intention to paralyse the country on Wednesday – but exactly how remains unknown. A briefing note from French intelligence and police warned that an estimated 100,000 protesters may block strategic transport energy and defence sites, train stations, petrol refineries and Amazon distribution centres as well as carrying out acts of sabotage.

There is a sense of deja vu about the impending political crisis that even supporters of Emmanuel Macron admit is of the president's making. Last year, he called a snap general election with the aim of consolidating his government's control of parliament after his centrist party had performed badly in European elections.

Instead, the election saw a surge in support for the far-right National Rally, whose progress was only stymied by a leftwing alliance in the second round vote that left the national assembly split into three groups, none of which had a majority. Macron could have chosen a prime minister from the left who, with the support of his own MPs, might be able to form a majority coalition government.

"The problem is that Macron is determined not to appoint someone from the left as prime minister because he fears they will unpick everything he has done up to now," Bristielle said. "So he chooses someone from the centre or centre-right, but they do not have the support of enough MPs."

Macron's chosen prime minister, Michel Barnier, was forced out after three months following MPs' rejection of his proposed budget. Now his replacement, Bayrou, is facing the same fate. He has proposed cuts of €44bn to public spending, achieved by freezing pensions and benefits, and cancelling two public holidays, along with other measures.

That Bayrou and his government will fall tomorrow seems certain. But what happens next is the unresolved question.

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Putin's fear of death is his weak spot
→ *Kate Maltby, page 27*

Angela Rayner's departure threatens to bring simmering Labour anxieties to the boil

Andrew Rawnsley

The approaching contest for a new deputy leader could turn out to be a proxy vote of confidence in the prime minister

Time was when Sir Keir Starmer would have lost little sleep about the fate of Angela Rayner, might have slumbered more peacefully knowing that she was gone. When Labour suffered the disastrous loss of the Hartlepool byelection in May 2021, he sought to sideline the deputy he did not choose, she retaliated by threatening a leadership challenge and he succumbed by festooning her with more titles than a grandee of the Hapsburg empire. It would be a stretch to say that the former barrister and the former care worker subsequently blossomed into bosom buddies. Both referred to themselves as an odd couple. But he grew to appreciate her value to government and to fear that her exit could spark a convulsive struggle over Labour's future.

In the build-up to Friday's resignation, the prime minister expended some of his depleted political capital by saying he was proud to have her by his side. That was all for naught when the findings of the ethics invigilator landed on his desk. Sir Laurie Magnus's praise for Ms Rayner for acting "with integrity" was trumped by his conclusion that she should have taken more care to be sure that she paid the correct amount of stamp duty on her flat purchase and her failure to do so was unequivocally a breach of the ministerial code.

"I have huge sympathy for Angela, but she had to go," says one cabinet member close to the prime minister. Sir Keir had pledged a tougher standards regime and to be merciless in the removal of ministers, however mighty or popular, who transgressed. He could either stick to that pledge or start becoming a version of Boris Johnson with a neater haircut. He chose to be "Mr Rules".

So it is goodbye to her as deputy prime minister, though not necessarily goodnight to her career. There is an established pattern of senior politicians spending time in the "sin bin" and then returning to the front rank. Peter Mandelson, now our man in Washington, was twice ejected from New Labour cabinets, only later to return as deputy prime minister. Ms Rayner is in her mid-forties with plenty of fans for a vivid and impactful personality who stands out when a lot of the rest of politics is monochrome. There is probably a way back for her one day. In the meantime, she will have to decide whether to be a supportive presence on the backbenches or to make Sir Keir's life even harder by becoming a sharp thorn in his side.

Days ago, the prime minister was saying he was proud to have Angela Rayner by his side. Dan Kitwood/Getty

That's one risk to him. Another is that this defenestration leaves an extremely bitter taste in the mouths of Labour people. Ms Rayner's biography involves rising from the challenges of an impoverished childhood and being a teenage mum to working as a home help and a union official on her way to becoming DPM. She is a living embodiment of Labour's ideal of social mobility. Her punchy scourging of Tory sleaze, for which they've now had their revenge, enhanced her appeal among Labour folk. She regularly topped the party activists' cabinet popularity contest run by the campaign group LabourList. Many in the party's ranks will see her as the victim of the hound dogs of the rightwing media. Some will seethe that Sir Keir has let Labour's enemies take the scalp of a figure they admire.

He may also miss the role she played in government. Against some resistance from elements of Team Starmer, she turned the job into one of significance. When the government needed to climb down from its welfare cuts back in June, it was she, not the prime minister or the chancellor, who negotiated the terms of the retreat with the rebels. The glee her resignation has ignited among Labour's foes – Nigel Farage brought forward his conference speech to have an instant gloat – is in part because she could make emotional connections with voters in a way few of the cabinet can.

On top of which, there is the potential for the contest for the vacant deputy leadership to become an unedifying spectacle that inflicts further harm to the battered reputation of the government. "Oh, god," groans one senior minister. "That won't be a pretty sight." Sir Keir has taken pre-emptive action by giving the job of deputy prime minister to David Lammy, sweetening his demotion to the justice brief. Constitutionally, the prime minister is within his rights to choose his own DPM, but some Labour members will be cross that their leader has no interest in who they think should be the government's second-in-command.

Yvette Cooper has become foreign secretary in order to move Shabana Mahmood to the Home Office. This is the most consequential move of what some wags are dubbing "Morgan McSweeney's reshuffle". The promotion is testimony to Number 10's admiration for her combination of toughness and clarity. Expect an even harder focus on rewriting international treaties, introducing ID cards, closing asylum hotels and speeding up removals. "She is the secretary of state for stopping the boats," says one Labour figure.

Reshuffles are rarely enough by themselves to revive the fortunes of a flagging government, but Number 10 is evidently hoping that this will look like a decisive response that softens the sting of the Rayner resignation. If Downing Street has its way, the contest for the party's deputy leadership will now be an interesting but inconsequential sideshow, not a divisive psychodrama. One source of alarm for allies of Sir Keir is that the electorate of activists and trades unionists are much less likely to have an appetite for a Starmer loyalist than a yearning for someone to his left. The candidates will tailor their messages accordingly. Do we really have to be polite to Donald Trump? Why can't we have a wealth tax? Shouldn't we tell Rachel Reeves to rewrite her fiscal rules? Why aren't we banning all arms sales to Israel? Should we be eviscerating the aid budget to put more cash into defence?

These and other troublesome questions are already rumbling away just below the surface of the Labour party. In the worst case scenario for the prime minister, the contest becomes a competition to identify where he has gone most wrong, a referendum on welfare, fiscal and foreign policy, and a proxy vote of confidence in him. Loyalist ministers are right to worry about the threat that it brings all the anxieties about the government's direction to a furious boil.

The immediate families of 25 of the 72 people who died in the Grenfell Tower disaster in June 2017, with Angela Rayner. Kimia Zabihyan

She listened to Grenfell's bereaved and then acted. Rayner had pure class – our class

Kimia Zabihyan

Unlike her predecessors as housing minister, she confronted the issue of dismantling the tower and demolition has now started

My 84-year-old mother called me in tears as I was watching a news bulletin about Angela Rayner's resignation.

"Is everything OK?" I asked. "It's Angela Rayner... I can't believe what they've done to her," she said.

Mum reached out because she knows that, in my capacity as an advocate for the Grenfell Next of Kin, I've met the former deputy prime minister and housing minister many times. Once, in my defence for missing a family gathering, I mentioned that I was seeing her. To my surprise, my mum recognised the name. "Oh... I like her," she said.

By the time Rayner assumed her most recent office in July 2024, Grenfell Next of Kin, and everyone affected, had endured seven different secretaries of state for housing under the Conservative government, following the Grenfell tragedy in June 2017, with Michael Gove stepping out and back in on two occasions.

The residents of Lancaster West Estate, where Grenfell stands, were left to navigate their challenges alone, against the backdrop of their own council, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, being at the heart of a criminal investigation and a key defendant, with no oversight or protection for the victims. Despite the fact that 72 of its residents had been killed in plain sight, no commissioners would ever be called in by the Tory government to oversee their Tory jewel in the crown, the royal borough.

In July 2024, I started reaching out to the next of kin of 42 of the 72 people who died in Grenfell, telling them we needed to see Rayner, the new minister. Many were sceptical: "How will this one be any different?"

Within two weeks of her taking office, we'd arranged a meeting between Rayner and a large group of mums, dads, children, siblings, partners, grandparents and grandchildren – families of more than half of the 72 people killed. We marched into her office in Marsham Street and we were serious. Rayner listened and when a man who had lost six members of his immediate family placed a photo of them before her on top of a flag, she remained calm, absorbing the trauma and anger. I couldn't help but recall our last meeting with her predecessor, Michael Gove, who had failed to engage with anyone, instead telling me "let me worry about the money", when I pointed out that £320m was being squandered away. To which I responded: "With all due respect, minister, it's not your money."

Since that meeting with the deputy prime minister in July 2024, we have attended many such consultation meetings. Each time, Rayner's civil servants steered her away. But she listened. When a father who had lost his son in the fire struggled to articulate his grief, a civil servant tried to usher Rayner out. Knowing how wounded the man would feel by being ignored, I shouted: "No, minister, please listen to him." She sat back down, allowing the father to find his quivering voice.

You couldn't help but admire her ambition, energy and pride.

Most of the families' engagements centred on the future of Grenfell Tower, which has been supported with 5,000 steel props that were being monitored 24/7, at great cost – both financial and emotional – for the families affected, and the nearly 2,000 residents of Lancaster West Estate who live under it.

The former Tory secretaries of state had no appetite to confront this challenge. In this purgatory of indecision, there could be no progress on the Grenfell memorial because, in order to make a memorial, a decision had to be made about the tower itself. Without a decision, the tower had to continue to be propped up and monitored. But, below the surface of the white tarpaulin shroud, it was deteriorating. In May 2021 structural engineers delivered a report urging that the deconstruction of the tower start "no later than May 2022".

> ***Losing her from our power base should be a tragedy for us all because it is a loss with cultural significance***

The tower, and what should happen to it, is a deeply sensitive and divisive conversation. But ultimately this came down to a structural and engineering issue. The civil servants and the royal borough found it difficult to talk about "risk" because to do so would have created demands they did not want to meet. Meanwhile, the tower was deteriorating, with 2,000 people living at its foot. Putting symbolism and emotion aside, the deconstruction of the tower was simply a structural and engineering issue and about "risk". Isn't that what responsible government is supposed to be about?

Rayner set about to break his stasis. At one meeting, she noted that "not making a decision is, in itself, a decision". At that moment, a gentle, quiet, disabled lady who had lived on the 23rd floor for more than 20 years, along with her son and her husband, who had jumped from the window when he could not escape, spoke up. "No. Make a decision," she said. "We need closure."

Many families of the deceased attended meetings with Rayner – daytime, evenings, online, at the weekends. These gatherings were emotional and difficult, but essential, and the families who came made a huge effort to engage.

So, nearly three years, seven ministers, hundreds of millions of pounds late, after the original deadline of May 2022, and only seven months into her tenure, Rayner came to west London to deliver her message that the tower would be brought down, to a charged room. She took the attack on the chin but making a decision about the tower made a big difference.

The deconstruction began this month. The cranes are in place. Each floor is being taken down and transported to another site for respectful burial. She could have made it someone else's problem, but she did not. This act of courage meant that in July those who wanted to were able to make a last visit to say goodbye in the spaces their kin had faced the horror of that inferno and then perished. A man who had lost his sister told me after the visit he felt "relieved". It was "an end of being in limbo, at least".

At one of our last meetings, Rayner arrived at about 7pm for a meeting that went on until 10pm. She was carrying a plate of curry from table to table as she met the families. She sat down at our table with a woman in her 80s who had lost her daughter, another who had lost her sister, and a third who had lost her husband of 25 years. "How's your dinner?" I asked her. "Cold," she said. I imagine she had many cold meals during her last year in office.

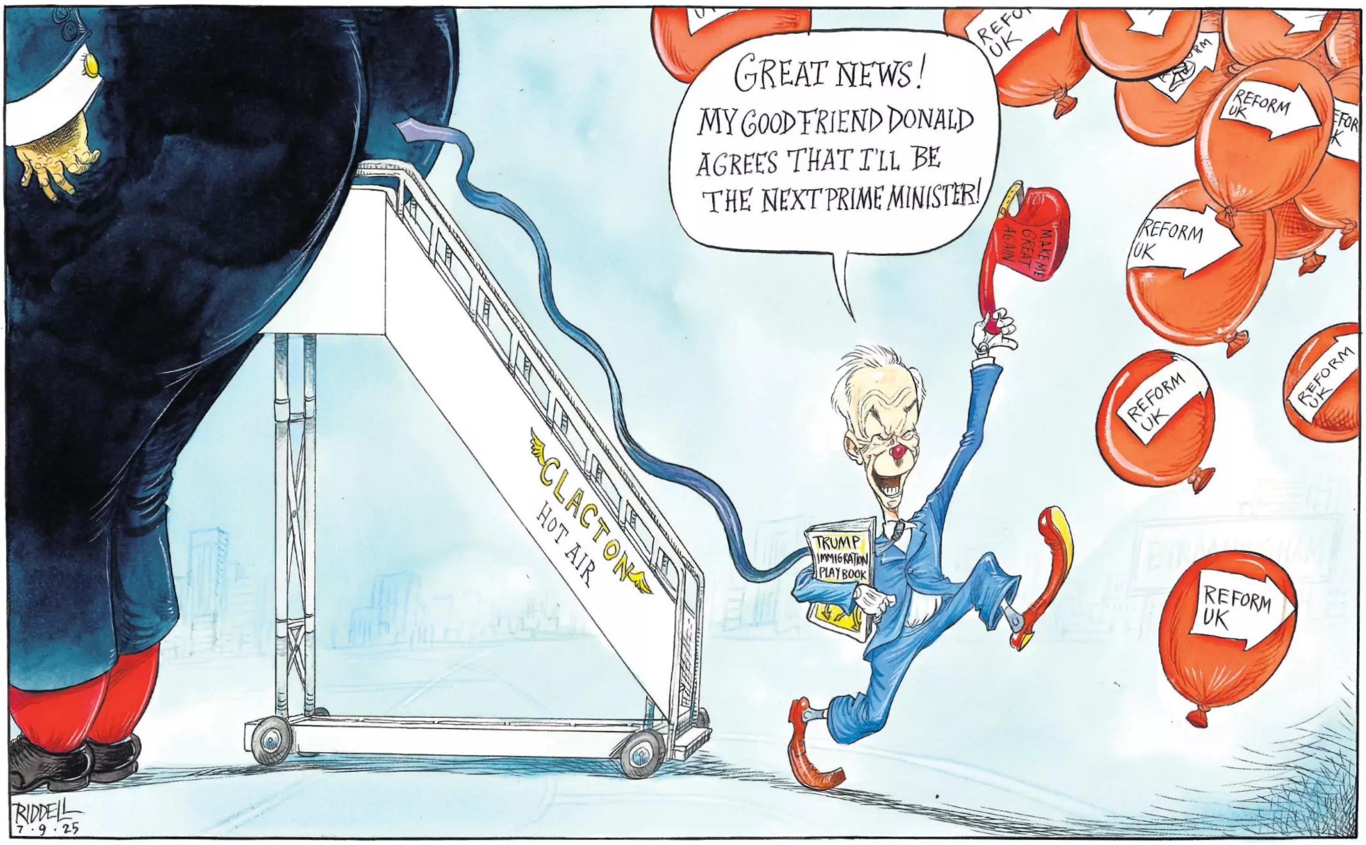
I worked out that the Grenfell meetings were around the time she would have been doing the paperwork for her flat in Hove, among the many other issues she was handling. Like a lot of women juggling so much, though none as DPM, she was probably putting herself last. I can't imagine that Rayner, who had worked so hard to get to where she was, would deliberately put it all on the line for £40,000. She's not daft.

I can't say the Whitehall mandarins ever liked my role but I felt Rayner understood advocacy. At one tense meeting I asked if I should leave and she came over to me at the end, held my hands and said: "Don't ever leave the room."

We don't have anyone like Angela Rayner in our country. Over the years, a lot of the scrutiny has centred around her "class", her smoking, vaping, tattoos, being a single mum; most of the language has been disgraceful and misogynistic. For years, she's remained authentic; that is her power. But the truth is, the loss of Angela Rayner from our power base should be a tragedy for us all, whether you agree with her politics or not, because it is a loss with cultural significance. It is a moment that might be lost on the men in suits but not to many of us up and down the country.

You can't buy class. Angela Rayner had pure class. Our class.

Kimia Zabihyan is advocate for Grenfell Next of Kin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Putin's fear of death is his weak spot Kate Maltby

What do you give the dictator who has everything? Throughout history, autocrats have hankered after the elixir of eternal life but, if you're on a diplomatic visit to China, promising it might play havoc with protocol.

Two and a half millennia before Vladimir Putin visited Xi Jinping for last week's military parade in Beijing, the ancient texts tell of a dignitary who presented an exotic substance to King Qingxiang of Chu, promising it could confer immortality. A nosy guard observed the exchange and snaffled the lot.

King Qingxiang condemned the thief to death. A canny adviser persuaded him to commute the sentence. Kill the guard, and you prove that the elixir he had just consumed provided no protection from death whatsoever. What greater insult could there be to the foreign guest than to prove him a liar? Instead, diplomatic protocol required that the pilfering guard be kept in the peak of health: a lesser evil than forcing one's boastful guest to lose face.

Xi may have borne this story in mind on Wednesday, as he smiled at Putin's talk of mortality-busting advances in biotechnology. Microphones picked them up, just as Xi was musing on the relative youth of today's septuagenarians. ("In the past, it used to be rare for someone to be older than 70 and these days they say that at 70 one's still a child.") This is perhaps self-serving: Xi is 72. But it was Putin who went further, expounding on one of his favourite subjects: eternal life. "With the development of biotechnology," we can just catch him saying, "human organs can be continuously transplanted, and people can live younger and younger, and even achieve immortality."

Former KGB agent Putin didn't specify where he hoped to find a ready supply of human organs. Global research laboratories, nicely bound by academic charters of ethics, have begun the synthetic bioprinting of some components of body parts, but Putin's reputation suggests something more akin to the nightmarish nurseries of clone children raised for organ harvesting, as depicted in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*.

Xi presides over a regime that has been credibly accused of harvesting organs from prisoners of conscience and victims of genocide, including Falun Gong practitioners, Uyghur Muslims or Tibetans. Last week, however, Xi was non-committal, replying: "Predictions are, this century, there's a chance of also living to 150." He didn't bet on immortality. Perhaps he's better informed than Putin about the limitations of recent transplant science. Or perhaps he just wanted to let his guest save face.

Dictators need to hunt for immortality: the afterlife is unlikely to be friendly to them. Whether you believe in hell, reincarnation, or simply a void, if you've got it all in this life, why risk losing it in the next? History is littered with tyrants reported to have taken extreme measures to extend their lives – including many of Xi's forebears in China. The first Chinese emperor, Qin Shi Huang, is said to have died of mercury poisoning after he spent years consuming a purported elixir of life – unfortunately, it probably contained cinnabar, aka mercury sulphide. (He made it to 49.) In the meantime, he'd also built the terracotta army to protect his spirit in the afterlife, which suggests Boris Johnson levels of "cakeism" (having your cake and eating it).

Western monarchs and Russian tsars made similar mistakes in the quest for eternal life. Thanks to archaeologists, we know that Putin's predecessor, Ivan the Terrible, also died with high levels of mercury in his body, which he may have taken as a cure for syphilis as well as an immortality drug. In Ivan's final days, he locked up 60 witches, male and female, with instructions to push back the date of his death supernaturally or face their own. (According to one historian, he also requested a cure for his swollen testicle.)

Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II didn't kill himself, but he did end up deposed by his religious subjects – of all denominations – after flaunting magicians and alchemists around his court. The 16th-century fraudster Edward Kelley promised him the philosopher's stone, the mythical source of immortality and of limitless gold. (Kelley's time in Prague also involved a notorious wife-swapping incident with fellow English magician John Dee.)

> ***Dictators must hunt for immortality: the afterlife is unlikely to be kind to them***

Death is the one thing a dictator can't control: no wonder so many have dreamed of conquering it. Fear of death breeds fear of life: for most autocrats, with the approach of mortality comes vulnerability, paranoia and increasing authoritarianism. It can't help that we traditionally rank both royal and political rulers by the length of their rule – think of Liz Truss, forever damned by her 49 days.

For constitutional monarchs – think Victoria, or Elizabeth II – a long life can offer their subjects the illusion of stability. But the final years of aged English monarchs have also been marked by stagnation and decay. George III may score third place on the royal longevity rankings, but he spent his final decade incapable of ruling. Edward III lost control of his parliament, going from war hero to senile lecher. Elizabeth I's last decade was by far her least successful, as her trusted counsellors died off, her soldiers went unpaid and a generation of rebellious young men chafed under the rule of an old woman.

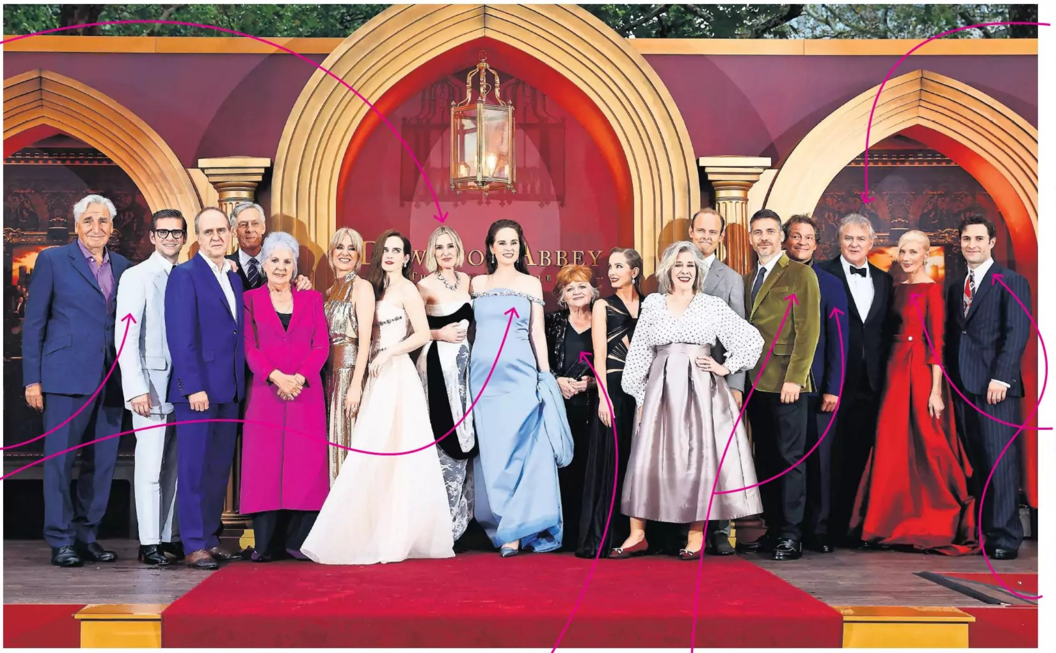
A new production of Liz Duffy Adams' play, *Born with Teeth*, which dramatises this period of Elizabeth I's reign, opened in London's West End last week. It's fun rather than substantial, a sexed-up spy tale of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, but it captures the paranoia that sets into surveillance states when the ruler is determined to go on and on – and would-be successors get desperate.

The quest for immortality may make Putin more dangerous. It also makes him vulnerable.

In the frame The world premiere of Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale, Leicester Square, London | 03.09.2025.

Don't mind me, m'lady, I'm just smoothing down my apron before I thwack the red carpet with my rattan beater at the premiere of the final *Downton* film. At your service, m'lord, with a plot summary: it's the 1930s and that pretty Lady Mary finds herself in a scandal, the family is struggling to make ends meet and the household teeters on the edge of disgrace.

They've promised that this is the last gasp of the franchise and everyone can have a little lie-down. But before then there was work to do: the pre-premiere bash at Claridges, the post-film do at the West End Ivy. The Ivy chain has a themed menu offering "dishes that honour the tastes and traditions of English countryside estates of the 1930s". Mmmm, tapioca and tongue with piccalilli.



Laura Carmichael, who plays Lady Edith, is said to have been working as a doctor's receptionist when she got the call to audition for *DA*. We're swooning at the idea she might have put us on hold when we called about our fungal toenails.

At school **Allen Leech** played the Cowardly Lion, but since then he's found the courage to play estate manager Tom Branson. And there's no place like (a stately) home!

Michelle Dockery "debuted" her pregnancy (is that a thing?), according to *Harpers Bazaar*, on the (very well-beaten, ma'am) red carpet. The actor, who plays Lady Mary, is expecting her first child with husband Jasper Waller-Bridge, the film producer and little brother of *Fleabag*'s Phoebe. Dockery wore a baby blue Prada gown.

Meet the workhorse behind the razz: uberproducer **Liz Trubridge**, who began her career at the BBC, has made all six series of *Downton*, the most successful British drama export of all time. Where's a hereditary peerage when you need one?

Rob James-Collier and **Dominic West** reprise their roles as the gay couple Thomas, a servant, and Guy, an actor who is said to be just as good as Dominic West and is less likely to lark around with a young female co-star in Rome.

Hugh Bonneville, Lord Grantham in *Downton*, used the occasion as a platform to talk about Gaza. "Before I talk about the fluff and loveliness of our wonderful film, what's about to happen in Gaza City is indefensible and the international community must do more to bring it to an end," Bonneville said and then got his valet on the case.

Joely Richardson, who knows a thing or two about dynasties and looked suitably grand in a Carolina Herrera frock, is a cast newbie. Thank god for **Arty Froushan**'s Noël Coward, who saves the film with his bitchy one-liners.

Dear Keir*

Grown-up advice from everyone's favourite centrist

Hullo Britain, and welcome to phase 2 of the Starmer ministry. Having spent a year or so rolling up our sleeves, we're now ready to focus on delivery, delivery, delivery – no more chaos or distractions. Well, except for that one thing...

In a catastrophic development, my deputy, Angela Rayner, has left to spend more time with her vape. I'm distraught, as is all the cabinet.

Despite our differences of opinion – like my belief that she should have been demoted after the Hartlepool byelection and her equally strong belief that she shouldn't have – Ange and I made a great team. You could say we're yin and yang. She's charismatic, authentic, loved by the unions and the membership. I'm... the yin to all that. We complemented each other perfectly (though we didn't often compliment each other – on more than one occasion, she referred to me as Clement Twatlee).

Still, Angela's departure has given me the chance to refresh my cabinet and bring in exciting new faces like David Lammy, Yvette Cooper and Pat McFadden. How about Shabana Mahmood as home secretary? I for one think it's inspiring that a Muslim woman will be in charge of raids and deportations.

Moaning minnies claim that Rayner was the last remnant of Labour's soft left, give or take a Miliband. That my government is about to veer even further right, doubling down on migrant bashing and welfare cuts. But I'm not ideological. Corbyn trolls accuse us of being Red Tories. Figures in the party call themselves Blue Labour. I like to think we're the best of both worlds – Blue Tories, if you will.

Anyway...

Dear Keir, I've been a chartered accountant for 25 years but I always yearned to be a DJ. Is middle age too late to change careers?
Lysander, Birkenhead

Hi Lysander, let me be clear: I only became a politician in my 50s, and we can all agree I'm doing amazing. Most MPs spend years plotting their path to No 10 (Wes Streeting wrote his maiden speech as a zygote). I kind of fell into being prime minister. I'm a passive protagonist, much like Forrest Gump.

That said, I object to the characterisation of me as a meat puppet for the Labour right (I'm thinking of Pogrund and Maguire's book *Get In*, which I haven't read but is bollocks).

Angela Rayner and I didn't compliment each other. She called me Clement Twatlee

I'm not some tool of the establishment. And I should know, given that my dad was a... well, you can Google it. In any case, good luck swapping Microsoft Excel for decks and a mixer!

Dear Keir, my marriage is OK but devoid of passion. Should I leave to take a gamble on true happiness?
Fran, Daventry

Fran, I advise you to plough on joylessly. I'm a firm believer in making do. Take the Labour membership: hundreds of thousands have left the party since I became leader. Some have rebounded with the Lib Dems or the Greens. Others even make eyes at Corbyn-Sultana. But are they happy? No, because "perfect" is the enemy of "only somewhat inadequate".

The smart ones stick around regardless of what I do. Zack Polanski may say the right (by which I mean left) things. Is he a knight of the realm? I think not. I must admit to feeling betrayed by these Labour deserters. Yes, I literally told them to leave if they didn't like my changes, but that was reverse psychology.

Anyway, I should go and tweet another 20 times about immigration. This is how we beat Farage: by accepting his arguments while claiming his solutions are impractical. I believe the British public wants a reasonable level of cruelty towards the most vulnerable. Moderate malice. Sensible sadism. That's why I kept shtum about Operation Raise the Colours. I'm not prepared to dismiss these protesters as far right. They're just painting things, and when has a painter ever been a fascist?

Until next week, smash the boats and stop the gangs! Or vice versa.

PS My comms team came up with a slogan for our economic agenda: "Growth that people can feel in their pockets." We also considered: "Is that growth in your pocket or are you just pleased to see us?"

Keir xxx

As told to Lucien Young

The Observer

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Flags of convenience

Nigel Farage is a showman who calls himself a patriot but betrays the good that Britain stands for

At a meeting of the European parliament in 2005, Tony Blair turned on a younger Nigel Farage, surrounded by Ukip MEPs, each with a little union jack perched on their desk. "Let me just tell you, sir, and your colleagues, you sit with our country's flag, you do not represent our country's interests." It is even more true today, 20 years on.

Last week, Farage went to Washington and talked down the UK, likening the country to North Korea. The comparison shouldn't be ignored just because it was puerile and condescending, nor because it shows how gleefully he exploits the free ride he's given by so much of the press, nor because his sucking up to Donald Trump is so obvious and cringeworthy.

A man hoping to run the country grossly misrepresented it. He told Congress his country had sunk into "a really awful authoritarian situation" such as exists in Pyongyang. It's nonsense but it also damages the country: it plays into a version of Britain that invites more of Elon Musk's divisive meddling in British politics, JD Vance's encouragement of the State Department to criticise Britain's record on human rights and a coalition of anti-abortion campaigners to funnel money into reversing human rights in the UK.

Farage is a showman who calls himself a patriot but betrays the good that Britain stands for. Never mind talking it down in Washington. He talks up mass deportations, a policy that gives succour to fascists and terrifies minorities. He fuels fury over asylum seekers, but ducks the real questions about a country – and an NHS – that depends on legal immigration. He stokes a climate of fear in a country that prides itself on tolerance. He uses patriotism to divide, when its role should be to unite, and his followers use flags – the union jack and the St George's cross – to exclude people, when they should bring people together; the use of the flag in anger, a not-so-coded expression of racism and nativism, rather than pride in the people, values and stories of the United Kingdom.

The Reform leader is right that Britain needs to pay attention to the quality of its public discourse, but wrong about why. The problem is a new politics of distraction and he is a big part of it. He lectures interviewers and the US House of Representatives about confected "free speech" emergencies, but he has nothing to say about the real challenges of cost of living and public services, technology and AI, global competitiveness and national security.

Patriotism is not logical. Pledging allegiance based on an accident of birth is an act of faith and faith is easily abused by cynics. Twenty years on from Farage's dressing down, he's in danger of doing something worse than simply sitting beside the flag, failing to represent the country's interests; he is fomenting a politics in which the flag does not stand for the best of the country itself.

Home truths

The member of parliament for Clacton said he had bought a house in his Essex constituency. Nigel Farage owns other property, but it turns out that he did not pay the higher rate of tax on a second home. Because, he now says, his girlfriend bought the house. When he was asked on television last year about the time he spent in Clacton, he said: "I've just exchanged contracts on the house that I'll be living there in – is that good enough?... I've bought a house in Clacton."

That's not an honest mistake. That's tax avoidance. And it was also a lie.

Liberals must talk to asylum hotel protesters

Will Hutton's article "A modern Enlightenment is possible" (Forum, last week) struck a chord since the motto of my son's school in Durham City is *sapere aude*: dare to be wise.

Now I understand how it should be mustered as a critical force against the fracturing ideologies of populism. But there is a faultline in liberals' efforts: progressives are talking chiefly to themselves. And that is no solution, no lever to shift communities together within the politics of true, evidence-based good sense. We need to talk, and listen, to the crowds outside asylum hotels.

I know too little of the lives of those protesting. But many are there to vent frustration at deprivation in their own communities, and until governments invest to make a difference in those communities they will be fertile ground for Reform's seeds of division.

This ground is furrowed further by the refugee community being "faceless". Their voices are rarely heard, their names unknown, their stories hardly told. They are anonymous, which is why they can be victimised by the likes of Nigel Farage.

In these circumstances, Keir Starmer's infamous "island of strangers" remark holds true. My gut feeling is that he used it to reflect the danger that, should we let the asylum debate become racialised, we – as a society – become strangers to ourselves, adrift from our values of tolerance and welcome, and divided by failure to see the needs of fellow citizens and refugees.

Ruth Chambers
Durham

No surrender

Thank you, Róisín Lanigan ("Watch out, England – you're being Ulsterised!", New Review, last week). You said it all, and so eloquently. Once, the English did not need reminding that they were English. Somehow that nauseating superiority was easier to live with.

Angela Singer
Cambridge

Failures in cancer care

Martha Gill ("There's a cancer treatment revolution – but Britain is being left behind", Forum, last week) has highlighted the precarious position of cancer care. Care that people should be able to count on.

Far too many breast cancer patients are missing out on an early diagnosis or facing anxious waits for lifesaving treatment. We must put these fundamentals right.

But we cannot overlook the importance of ensuring patients can access new drugs they desperately need. Cutting-edge cancer medicines save and extend lives. Yet a deeply unfair system is denying people with incurable secondary breast cancer life-extending treatments. And worse, this flawed system is deterring companies from putting new treatments through a National Institute for Health and Care Excellence appraisal.

Claire Rowney
Chief executive, Breast Cancer Now

Plastic sea bubble

Five whole pages on the bubble tea phenomenon ("The rise and rise of bubble tea, Magazine, last week) and no mention of the pernicious impact on the environment? Single-use plastic cups, lids and straws add to landfills or end up in the oceans. I wish you had tested shops' commitment to sustainability by bringing a reusable cup and straw.

Frankie Meehan
Singapore

Cruising for a bruising

Séamas O'Reilly (Magazine, last week) should beware. People with very pale complexions like his (and mine) are likely, should they live to 70 or so, to contract senile purpura. This consists of blotchy dark patches on the skin, primarily on the arms. It generates concern from others, who ask how you got the bruises but probably won't believe the answer.

John Starbuck
Huddersfield, West Yorkshire

Secrets of waist control

It's sad that people damage themselves then want a pill or jab to undo it (The Waist Land, News, last week). For 65 years my weight has not varied by more than 2kg and my waistline is just half an inch larger – so I still wear 35-year-old trousers. My only medication at 85 is for mild, age-related hypertension, having led a deliberately unexciting life.

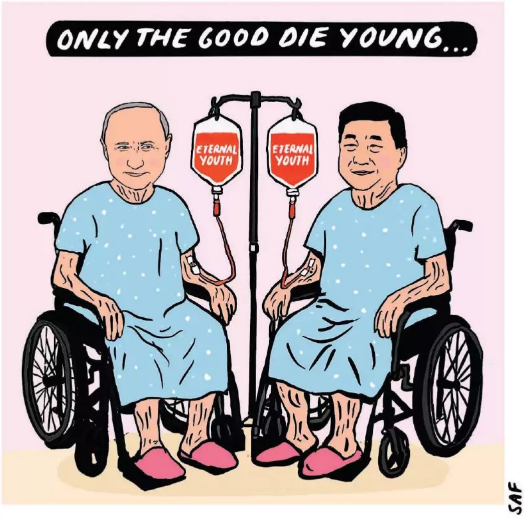
Michael Miller
Sheffield

Bean there, done that

Oh, the dilemma of being a working-class *Observer* reader. I'm delighted that global coffee shop chains are suffering ("We loved Costa...", News, last week). But if they are going to be replaced by anything called "artisan", then count me out.

Colin Mann

SAF



For the record

- As the result of a technical issue beyond our control, some early editions of *The Observer* were not as we would have wished them to be last week. Images and football league tables were affected. Our apologies to readers.
- We mistakenly named Fiji's Alfreda Fisher as a USA player in the diagram accompanying our Women's Rugby World Cup wall chart (17 August, Sport, page 12).
- The incorrect rules and requests were printed with this week's Azed plain puzzle, No. 2770 (New Review, page 39). The next clue-writing competition will be with Azed 2771.
- *Write to readers@observer.co.uk*

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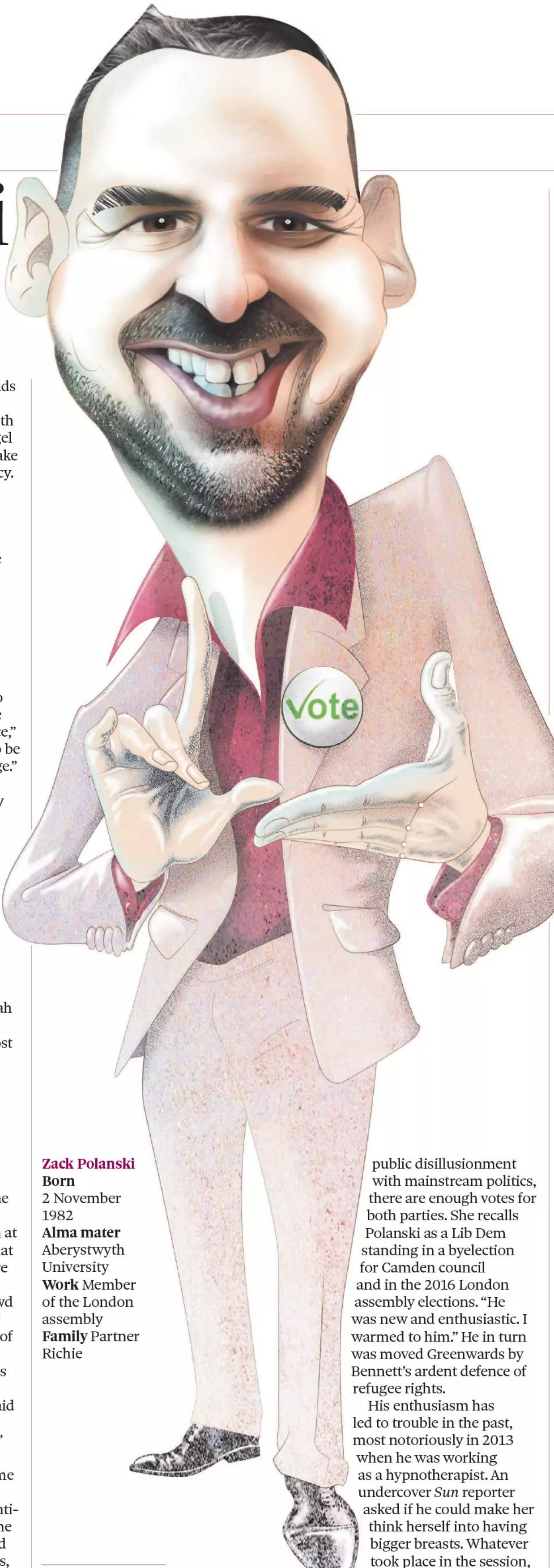
Profile

Zack Polanski



The new Green party leader has swept in on a tide of leftwing populism that will worry Labour, writes *Andrew Anthony*

Last week, Zack Polanski, a 42-year-old gay Jewish vegan, became leader of the Green party with a promise to turn it into a leftwing version of Reform UK.

Back in May, after a poor showing in the local council elections, a government minister spoke of Labour's good fortune that the Greens were useless: "If they had any kind of charismatic or populist leadership we'd be eight to 10 points further down in the polls."

Polanski, who won by a landslide, may well be that leader. He is a proponent of "eco-populism", a combination of leftwing economics and headline-grabbing presentation. Or, as he has also phrased it, "substance with clickbait".

The term itself may well amount to more clickbait than substance, but part of the idea is to create a narrative with identifiable "baddies". He wants to focus more on corporations and the super-rich for "destroying our environment, our communities, our democracy". He advocates playing down the environmental message, particularly in terms of personal responsibility, by targeting the government instead.

Constantly citing the climate crisis, he argues, is not the way to win the votes of people worried about their own economic plight. He is ready to attack the government's net zero policies from the left, criticising expectations for "people to install heat pumps" or "get a train rather than a plane" if the latter is cheaper. In his leadership campaign, Polanski said the party, the fifth most popular in the UK, needed to tap into "people's anger". He would focus on "redistributing the wealth from the super-rich to fund public services, and calling out the genocide in Gaza".

As political priorities go, they might well incite as much anger as they harness, but a divisive strategy has worked for Reform – which, despite having the same number of MPs as the Greens (just four) – leads the polls.

That success has much to do with the dominating personality of Nigel Farage. The Greens traditionally take pride in their grassroots democracy. Will Polanski's search for the spotlight cause tension?

"I don't think so," says Anthony Slaughter, the Welsh Green party leader, who has spent a lot of time with Polanski and his partner, Richie, who works in palliative care. "The party decides policy and strategy; the leaders are just messengers. And Zack is a very humble person, a team player."

Former Green leader Natalie Bennett is all in favour of a shift to a more assertive approach. "We've probably tended to be a bit too nice," she says. "We need to be spikier to be heard. I think that's Zack's message."

One reason Polanski trounced the joint pairing of Adrian Ramsay and Ellie Chowns that makes up half of the parliamentary party, is that he took to social media with impassioned, emotive videos. Having worked in theatre, he understands the power of simple messaging and a compelling vision – in this case of a world divided between the venal rich and exploited poor. The problem is that it's a vision shared by Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana's as yet nonexistent party, whose statement of intent is almost indistinguishable.

Two weeks ago, the new Green leader visited the Forward festival with Sultana. Last week, Corbyn warmly welcomed his "stunning victory" and said that he looked forward to working with him "to create a fairer, kinder world".

It's a long way from the day, nine years ago, when Polanski, then a Liberal Democrat, heckled Corbyn at a Momentum rally, shouting: "What about Europe, Jeremy? Where were you when we needed you?"

Back then, members of the crowd denounced Polanski as a "piece of shit" and, far worse in the lexicon of leftwing insults, a "Tory".

Now there is talk of a pact. In his campaign, Polanksi seemed to be leaning in that direction, but he said last week that he would need to see some "very strong arguments" before supporting such a move.

The realistic choice is either some form of electoral agreement or a split of the big public spending, anti-growth, tax-the-rich vote. And if the Greens' economic plan is informed by magical thinking, so is Reform's, and that hasn't held it back so far.

Bennett believes that, such is public disillusionment with mainstream politics, there are enough votes for both parties. She recalls Polanski as a Lib Dem standing in a byelection for Camden council and in the 2016 London assembly elections. "He was new and enthusiastic. I warmed to him." He in turn was moved Greenwards by Bennett's ardent defence of refugee rights.

His enthusiasm has led to trouble in the past, most notoriously in 2013 when he was working as a hypnotherapist. An undercover *Sun* reporter asked if he could make her think herself into having bigger breasts. Whatever took place in the session, he did not charge her for it and featured in the resulting piece, in which the reporter claimed her breasts grew for for 10 days after their meeting. He says he was misrepresented, but has nonetheless apologised for his part in the story.

Born David Paulden in Salford, Greater Manchester, Polanski changed his surname at 18 to the original family name. He says his grandfather abandoned it after arriving in the UK, to avoid antisemitism. As his stepfather was also a David, he chose Zack after a Jewish character in the children's novel *Goodnight Mister Tom.*

He attended a private school, Stockport Grammar, and studied drama at Aberystwyth University before going to drama school in Atlanta, Georgia. It was in the American South, he said, that he witnessed growing racism and experienced explicit homophobia.

The problem is, his is a vision shared by Corbyn and Sultana's party

Back in the UK, he worked in community theatre before his turn as a hypnotherapist. He may need all his theatrical and hypnotic powers to transform some of his convictions into popular policy. The Greens have long supported unilateral nuclear disarmament, but, even with eastern Europe under threat from an increasingly bellicose Russia, Polanski also wants to see the UK withdraw from Nato and an alternative arrangement of "peace and diplomacy". Slaughter says Trump has changed everything by threatening to invade another Nato territory (Greenland), but that Polanski isn't calling for the UK to leave Nato just yet. So after Trump has left office? "This is the moment, perhaps, for Europe to form a European defence alliance," Slaughter says. It would mean far more defence spending. Is Polanski in favour of that? "We're in favour of spending more on peace," says Slaughter.

Then there's freedom of expression and growing public resentment of policing tweets rather than streets. Last week, Polanski approved the arrest by five armed policemen of the comedy writer and gender critical activist Graham Linehan for three unpleasant tweets, describing it as "proportionate". A more vocal stance on such positions might attract support in some urban constituencies – Polanski lives in Hackney – but, during the leadership campaign, Ramsay and Chowns warned it would alienate voters in rural seats like their own.

Polanski clearly believes that the party's growth lies in Labour-held cities and towns rather than the Tory countryside. If he's right, the polls will look very bleak indeed for the government.

Zack Polanski
Born
2 November 1982
Alma mater
Aberystwyth University
Work Member of the London assembly
Family Partner Richie

Illustration by *Andy Bunday*

Obituary

Sylvain Amic

The Musée d'Orsay director, who has died aged 58, 'wanted everyone to be able to access the marvels of art'

It is one of the greatest cultural honours in France, perhaps second only to director of the Louvre, to be entrusted with the treasures of the Musée d'Orsay. The gallery, built in a former Beaux-Arts railway station on the Left Bank of the Seine, only opened in 1986 but it contains much of France's artistic glory, from the dawn of the Second Republic in 1848 to the start of the first world war.

Sylvain Amic said it had been "his dream" to be appointed as its seventh director in April 2024, especially to be handling the conclusion of the six-year Orsay Grand Ouvert project to mark its 40th anniversary. His death from heart failure last week means he did not achieve his mission of rehanging a familiar cast of characters that includes Degas's chorus singers, Millet's gleaners, Boudin's bathers, Renoir's Montmartre dancers and – a rare American interloper – Whistler's mother.

The collection also includes sculptures by Rodin and Gauguin, Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and a choice of *déjeuners sur l'herbe*, depending whether you want your guests naked (Manet) or clothed (Monet). Almost 5 million visitors last year went to the Orsay and its sister gallery, the Musée de l'Orangerie in the Tuileries Gardens, which Amic also ran, and which holds Monet's *Water Lilies*.

Sylvain Amic with Rodin's Ugolin at the Musée d'Orsay. Axelle de Russé

"The Musée d'Orsay is a republican museum, a national asset that must be restored to the nation as a whole," he told *Le Monde* last year. Emmanuel Macron, who appointed him, said that Amic "wanted everyone to be able to access the marvels of art, from Manet to Soulages". The president added that Amic "knew the universal emancipatory power of our culture". Rachida Dati, the minister of culture, described him as "a warm man, attentive to others, who believed in opening culture to everyone".

Amic made an unorthodox ascent to such a prestigious role, having previously been curator in provincial museums. He was born in 1967 in Dakar, Senegal, where his parents were teachers, and entered the same profession, becoming a headteacher in Banjul, the capital of the Gambia, before seeking a career change in his late 30s when he was accepted to study at the National Institute of Cultural Heritage in Paris.

Aged 33, he joined the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, where he presented exhibitions on Gustave Courbet, the realist painter, and Pierre Soulages's stained-glass windows for Conques Abbey. In 2008, he organised a major show at the Grand Palais in Paris featuring 90 works by Emil Nolde, a German expressionist. Amic burnished his reputation over 10 years in Rouen, where he brought the city's 11 museums under one umbrella. He organised shows on impressionism and the history of cathedrals and, in 2021, created a programme for the bicentenary of the birth in the city of the writer Gustave Flaubert.

This brought him to the attention of Rima Abdul Malak, the former minister of culture, who in 2022 appointed him as her adviser on museums, design and fashion. She told the *New York Times* how his background in sub-Saharan Africa made him sensitive to France's colonial past, helping in the preparation of laws for the restitution of human remains and looted art.

Abdul Malak said she found Amic, with his floppy hair and wry smile, to be "humane, considerate and very gentle", and she appreciated his focus on the 19th century as "the matrix of the contemporary world".

Amic had applied to run the Orsay in 2017 when Guy Cogeval's term ended, but François Hollande instead appointed Laurence des Cars, who later became the Louvre's first female director. She was succeeded in 2021 by Christophe Leribault, and when he left to become president of the Palace of Versailles, Amic got his chance.

Dati said Amic had been chosen because of his support for regional culture and his work in promoting the "democratisation" of art through "multidisciplinary initiatives". While in Montpellier, he had helped to create the first website for Frame, a bilateral collaboration between French and American collections. In Rouen, he had staged digital exhibitions on slavery and Jewish refugees in the second world war.

With the restoration of the Orsay's entrance hall and a new research centre due to open next year, he next intended to take some of the collection around France with a mobile museum. An exhibition on John Singer Sargent opens this month, with one on Renoir coming in March. One of his top priorities, though, was to welcome more children from an early age through a "Petits M'O" programme of music, film, storytelling and art classes. "It will invite them to push the door of the art world in a fun and joyful way," he said.

After Amic's early death, Dati said: "Art has lost one of its best connoisseurs and a great servant of the state."

Patrick Kidd

Sylvain Amic, curator and art historian, was born on 26 April 1967, and died on 31 August 2025, aged 58

My week

Vespillo burying beetle

Some say that powerful scents bring back the past. Not me. In that single moment of gorgeous olfaction I smelled a glorious future. All the hope in the world was revealed by the scent that wafted towards me on the gentlest breeze. There was a corpse out there, a good mile off, and I knew at once that it would bring me all the joy and happiness a beetle is capable of.

Monday
By this time, there were two of us. We're strong fliers and we made the journey across the Surrey night with little trouble. And there it was: just about perfect. A short-tailed field vole: dead, ripe and luscious. Nothing became him in life like the leaving of it. It wasn't just delicious: it was the start of family life.

Tuesday
I'm sure your knowledge of Latin is greater than mine, and that I don't need to tell that a vespillo is a person who buries paupers. Also a night-thief, but we're no thieves. Humble buriers of the deceased, that's us. First, we moved the vole to a more suitable spot, then we removed the fur and shaped the body into a neat ball. As undertakers, we are always fastidious. After that, we began to excavate underneath it. At the same time we covered it with earth. Down it went. What greater ceremony? We could hardly have done a better job if we'd put up a cross and a weeping angel.

Wednesday
She laid the eggs as soon as we got the late vole underground: all around the corpse. We then rested up and feasted on vole, in the certain knowledge that life was about to get pretty hectic.

Thursday
Some beetles lay as many eggs as possible and just leave them, hoping at least one offspring will survive. I wouldn't presume to criticise a fellow coleopteran, but that's not the way it's done among vespillos. The eggs hatched and it was time to tend the grubs. To defend them from anything that might want to share the vole and take a grub or two as an hors d'oeuvre.

There was a corpse out there. I knew it would bring me all the joy I'm capable of

Friday
And we both also fed them on pre-digested vole: nothing's too good for our grubs. Below ground, it's an absolutely frenzy of family life, and the grubs are growing before our eyes. It's 95% worry and 5% satisfaction: but as all K-strategists know, no matter what taxon they come from, that's parenting.

Saturday
Maybe another week to go. Then the grubs will have pupated and the vole will have served us as well in death as he served himself in life. The last offspring will overwinter as pupae and emerge into the spring looking for love. And, of course, death.

Vespillo burying beetle CV
Lifespan One year in total
Eating habits A nice corpse
Hobbies Tombs
Sexual preferences It's those orange bobbles on the antennae that always get me

As told to Simon Barnes

AFGHANISTAN EARTHQUAKE APPEAL

A DEVASTATING 6.0 MAGNITUDE EARTHQUAKE HAS HIT AFGHANISTAN – 1,400 PEOPLE ARE ESTIMATED TO HAVE DIED, AND OVER 3,000 INJURED.

With many feared to be still trapped under rubble, the number of casualties is expected to increase over the coming days.

Entire villages have been destroyed with many survivors having watched their homes collapse. Children are sleeping under open skies, exposed to the elements. Families have lost everything. Winter is now approaching and without urgent support, lives are at risk.

This tragedy comes on top of crisis after crisis. Millions of Afghans are already facing extreme poverty and hunger, as well as the impact of decades of conflict and economic collapse. Over 2.4 million Afghan refugees have returned or been forced to return to Afghanistan this year—many to communities which are already struggling.

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and partners are on the ground racing to deliver lifesaving supplies including emergency shelter, sleeping mats and blankets. But the need is overwhelming and the emergency response is already stretched to breaking point.

£86 could help provide a displaced family with lifesaving essentials including shelter, sleeping mats and blankets.

Without more support, too many families will go without.

Please act now to help save lives.

UNHCR's partner, AREWO, assessing the needs of the population affected by the earthquake.

UNHCR has been present in Afghanistan for four decades and has the reach, expertise, and access to deliver aid where it's needed most—but we need more help to reach more people, faster.

Your support can help bring shelter, hope, and safety to those who have lost everything. Please, give what you can today.

£86 could help provide a displaced family with lifesaving essentials including shelter, sleeping mats and blankets.

Give now to help save lives at **unrefugees.org.uk/afghan-observer**
Call **0800 029 3883**, scan the **QR code**, or **fill in the form below**

I would like to give: ☐ **£86** ☐ **£172** ☐ **Other £** ________

☐ I enclose a cheque made payable to **UK for UNHCR** OR

☐ I would like to make a donation by debit/credit card

Card no. ☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐ Expiry date ☐☐/☐☐

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Date / /

☐ Tick here, if you don't want to receive an acknowledgement by post

Title First name Last name

Address

Postcode

Email*

Phone*

*Please provide your details to receive updates by email and/or phone on the impact of your support, future appeals and details of the other ways you may wish to help.

Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

A minimum of 75% of your gift will directly help UNHCR's work in Afghanistan.
United Kingdom for UNHCR is a registered charity in England and Wales (1183415).

Please return this form along with your cheque to:
Freepost UK FOR UNHCR **(you don't need a stamp)**

Increase your donation by 25p for every £1 you donate giftaid it

☐ I would like UK for UNHCR to claim Gift Aid on this donation (currently 25p for each £1 donated), as well as any donations I make in the future and have made in the past four years to UK for UNHCR, until I notify you otherwise. I confirm I am a UK taxpayer and I understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. I understand that council tax and VAT do not qualify. If your circumstances change or you have any questions, please contact our Supporter Care Team on **0800 029 3883** or email **supportercare@unrefugees.org.uk**
The Gift Aid claimed will be used to fund the whole of UK for UNHCR's work.

Respecting your personal data: We will use your details to process your donation and to keep you up to date with our work, fundraising activities and other events. You can read more about how we use your data in our Privacy Policy **unrefugees.org.uk/privacy-policy** You can opt out of any communications at any time by contacting our **Supporter Care Team** using the details above.

Today, you could help save a life. Scan now to give online.

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency
United Kingdom for UNHCR

P25K5

Business

Economics, work and money

The six warning signs as crypto is welcomed into the US mainstream
→ Richard Lambert, pages 36-38

LEFT
Jean Innes, Sir John Bell and Poppy Gustafsson have all stepped down from their key jobs in driving tech. *Sophia Evans/The Observer, Getty*

Tech turmoil threatens investment drive in UK

Three sudden exits from the top of science and investment have raised fresh questions about Britain's abilities to attract talent and capital, report *Patricia Clarke* and *Barney Macintyre*

Keir Starmer isn't the only one changing the guard. In the past week, the UK's tech and business landscape has been hit by a string of high-profile resignations from institutions all created to parade Britain's scientific prowess on the world stage.

On Tuesday, a page quietly appeared on the website of Ellison Institute of Technology (EIT), a group of mainly for-profit companies based in Oxford funded by the US billionaire Larry Ellison, announcing the resignation of its president, Sir John Bell – an eminent scientist known for his role as broker between business and government during the Covid-19 vaccine rollout.

Shortly afterwards, it emerged that Jean Innes, the chief executive of the Alan Turing Institute, a world leader in AI research, was stepping down after months of staff revolt.

On Friday, the government announced that Baroness Poppy Gustafsson, the former CEO of cyber defence company Darktrace, would be leaving her post as head of the newly created Office for Investment – dubbed a "concierge service" for foreign investment – after less than a year into the role.

She will be replaced by Jason Stockwood, the former Grimsby Town FC chair who has held executive or director roles at Simply Business, Skyscanner and Match.com.

All three departures come as the government seeks to advertise the UK's strengths in AI, life sciences and deep tech as a remedy for lacklustre growth. Last week former tech secretary (now business secretary) Peter Kyle delivered a speech extolling the UK's "entrepreneurial zeal", its roadmap for AI and deep pools of scientific talent.

A source close to the matter said Prof Bell had begun to find it "difficult" working for Oracle founder Ellison, who is the world's second richest man, according to the Bloomberg Billionaire's Index.

Within the past four months, two members of EIT's executive team – Charlie Foreman, the EIT's chief financial officer, and Tamsin Berry, who was chief of staff to Bell – had left the organisation after one of Ellison's increasingly frequent visits to the UK.

Oracle founder Larry Ellison is visiting his Oxford project more frequently.

After the visit, "changes [in staffing] were made quite quickly", said one former staffer, who suggested Ellison was unhappy about how the institute was run. A source speaking about Berry's departure said: "She'd been pushed out because the top Ellison team, presumably Larry, couldn't see what her purpose was given there was already a chief operating officer and a [global] president."

The EIT did not respond to requests for comment.

Bell's departure was announced by Ellison himself in an all-staff email seen by *The Observer*, during his visit on Tuesday. "I will miss him," it said. "All of us have benefited from having such a distinguished scientist at the helm during these early years."

Founded in 2023, the EIT has plans to grow into 300,000 sq ft of research laboratories, and education and meeting spaces around Oxford. The billionaire's funding has gone towards buildings designed by Norman Foster and a $200m property in Mayfair as a London hub.

The relationship between Oxford University and the for-profit institute isn't entirely clear. According to one staff member, the company was set up so that for every stream of work, a "strange internal company with a nominal CEO" would be established. It's understood that people leading these streams can receive equity shares in companies that are successfully spun out, while Ellison's companies are empowered to take a 51% stake – sometimes more.

EIT Oxford Holdings LLC, a company affiliated with the institute, has been steadily growing a stake in Oxford Nanopore, a biotech company that has struggled on the UK's junior stock market since it was spun out of the university in 2005. Four weeks ago its founder Gordon Sanghera said he would be stepping down.

It is understood that Ellison has given funding towards researchers at the EIT to explore the rapid testing of vaccines using AI. The results, if successful, could be highly lucrative – but it's unclear whether the research will be conducted in the university or in EIT labs, and who will ultimately control the IP and profit streams.

Sir John Bell will be replaced by Santa Ono, former president of the University of Michigan. Ono had been touted to run the University of Florida, but was ousted after a conservative backlash for his support of diversity and inclusion initiatives. An ex-staffer said the leadership change would provide a much-needed "reset".

The future of the Alan Turing Institute is less certain. In July, Kyle called for new leadership and told the institute to pivot toward defence, national security and "sovereign capabilities" – and threatened to pull funding if it did not. Public sector funding represents almost half the Turing's annual income. A source said the institute would step up its work on defence following Kyle's directive, but staffers said there remains unhappiness with other senior members of leadership, including the chief scientist Mark Girolami.

> *A company affiliated with EIT has been steadily growing a stake in biotech company Oxford Nanopore*

They question is whether Innes's resignation will be enough to turn around an institute that has seen years of discontent. "Leadership are all clearly hoping that Jean going is enough," said one employee. "I think it's a measure of just how out of touch they are with reality."

Unless the institute restructures, it will remain in a standoff with the government and risks losing crucial funding, two sources suggested. A source close to Doug Gurr, who remains chair of the Institute, in addition to his roles as interim chair of the Competition and Markets Authority and director of the Natural History Museum, said they "strongly encourage Doug to step away". His leadership represents an "era problem", the source said.

Both institutes represent "a massive opportunity" for the UK, said a former Ellison staffer. The EIT in particular "is big enough and it's got enough money that you could make it extraordinary".

The tumult will not allay fears that UK plc is at risk of failing to capitalise on new flows of talent. In July, the government announced a £54m Global Talent Fund to attract between 60-80 of the world's top researchers. But some argue this pales in comparison with a €500m "super-grant" package for the period 2025–2027 put forward by the EU.

Stockwood faces an uphill challenge to coax investment into the UK, and takes on the role – which will advise both Treasury and the Department for Business and Trade – weeks before an investment summit is due to take place in Birmingham.

A government source said that Stockwood's appointment was an attempt to "bolster credibility with industry, particularly the tech and financial services sectors".

The minutes

Reporting by Barney Macintyre

Finance

It's sell-off time for sovereign bonds

Sovereign bond markets settled last week, after long-dated borrowing costs in the UK, US and France all reached multi-year highs. Short-term catalysts for the global bond sell-off included Keir Starmer's reshuffle, the French prime minister's game of chicken over budget cuts and Donald Trump's threats to Federal Reserve independence. Longer term, it's evident that record levels of borrowing among rich nations, plus a slowing down of central bank debt purchases, is a recipe for keeping yields high. Some relief came on Wednesday after disappointing US jobs data prompted bets that the Fed would cut interest rates more aggressively, and the yield on the 30-year US Treasuries fell below 5%.

Energy

Pension funds dump 'ungreen' BlackRock

One of Europe's largest pension funds has pulled a mandate worth €14bn from BlackRock owing to concerns over the US asset manager's recent voting record on sustainability. PFZW, which looks after €248bn in pension assets for 2 million Dutch healthcare workers, said it would be dumping its contract with BlackRock after launching a new investment strategy in which financial performance, risk and sustainability carry equal importance. In February, the UK's People's Pension withdrew a staggering £28bn from State Street global advisers, citing a misalignment with its priorities. PME, the Dutch industrial workers' pension scheme, is also reviewing a €5bn mandate with BlackRock.

Climbing the ladder

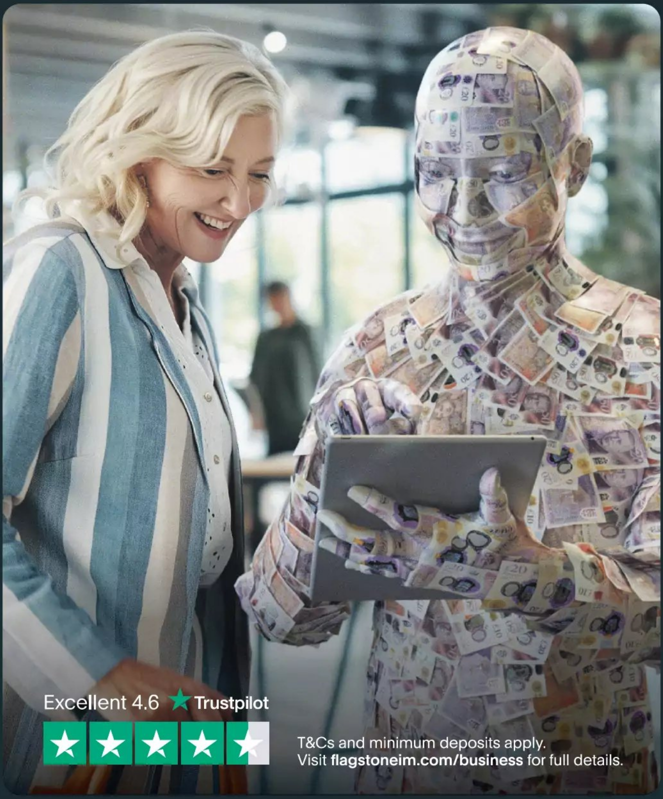
Chloe Malle follows fashion journalism's hardest act at US Vogue (but Anna hasn't left her office)

Chloe Malle has been appointed the new head of editorial content at American *Vogue*, succeeding Anna Wintour at the US edition, while Wintour remains Condé Nast's chief content officer. The 39-year-old was the editor of Vogue.com and co-host of the Run-Through podcast. Advertisers will watch whether Malle can accelerate social reach and develop new revenue streams without cheapening the masthead. "The truth is, no one's going to replace Anna," admitted Malle. Wintour is still her direct supervisor, overseeing all 28 international editions of *Vogue*. And she isn't moving out of her office. "I'm very happy she's down the hall with her Clarice Cliff pottery," said Malle, right.

Industry

Flat Pepsi gets $4bn investment shake-up

Anyone for a food fight? Activist investor Elliott Management has taken a $4bn stake in PepsiCo and called for a review of its product portfolio to boost the drinks maker's flagging share price. Elliott, known for its aggressive shake-ups at HP Enterprise and BP (*see p10*), said Pepsi's "disappointing trajectory" has created a "historic opportunity" to unlock significant shareholder value. The disclosed stake is one of Elliott's biggest positions. Pepsi's snacking arm, which has brands such as Doritos, is a likely target. The firm's market value has shrunk by roughly a quarter from a peak of $270bn in May 2023. Earlier this year, it dropped to fourth place in the big soda ranking by sales volume, behind Coca-Cola, Dr Pepper and Sprite.



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Why the world’s navies are queuing for sub-hunters built on the Clyde

Norway’s £10bn order for Type 26 frigates marks a new era for British shipyards

Bernard Gray
Contributing Editor, National Security

By any measure, Norway’s decision to order at least five Type 26 frigates from the UK is a big deal. It is the largest export order for warships to be built in British shipyards since at least the second world war, measured by tonnage, lethality and, of course, cost.

This £10bn deal for the ships, each weighing about 7,000 tonnes, was also a huge boost for BAE Systems, which will build the ships at its Govan and Scotstoun yards on the Clyde, as well as for many subcontractors around the UK. Babcock International’s shipyard at Rosyth in Fife is also bidding for a contract to build four frigates for the Danish navy, worth more than £1bn.

The Type 26 design has been licensed to Australia, which wants six ships and Canada, which wants up to 15. Taken together with the eight ships on order for the Royal Navy, that means that more than 30 of this class of ships are likely to be built, with the potential for further orders.

Why has the ship done so well? The Type 26 frigate was designed to find and destroy submarines. Highly classified techniques were used to quieten the ship, along with high-precision machining, to dampen any vibration. This gave it a significant advantage against the American, German and French competitors seeking the Norwegian order.

***ABOVE* The Type 26 frigate, HMS Cardiff, under construction on the Clyde.**
Iain Masterton/ Alamy

The UK had another critical advantage. With Russian activity in the North Sea and North Atlantic increasing, Norway wants the ships delivered by 2029. The British were best placed to offer this commitment. While no announcement has yet been made, it is likely that either the third ship in the UK series, designated as HMS Belfast, or the fourth, HMS Birmingham, will be diverted to Norway, with deliveries beyond that interleaved for each navy.

Achieving the expansion in capacity will not be easy. BAE must increase its drumbeat of shipbuilding from one ship delivered every 18 months to one a year by 2030, and its systems suppliers will also have to keep up.

BAE and its suppliers have already started. A covered yard has been built at Govan, increasing productivity, and an academy established alongside to train a new generation of heavy engineering specialists.

Construction of ship blocks may be shared with Ferguson Marine, also on the Clyde, as well as Cammell Laird on Merseyside and A&P on the Tyne, both of which have worked on the existing orders.

Subsystems suppliers have been supported to handle higher volumes. A ground testbed at David Brown Santasalo in Huddersfield will help develop and test the complex gearboxes made for the ships.

The company is likely to supply the Australian and Canadian navies too.

It’s a similar story at GE’s electric motor plant in Rugby, where the factory was in danger of closure from lack of work, until the previous government ordered the entire run of motors for the Type 26 engines to give the factory a breathing space and the workforce time. That decision has now come good.

Other suppliers, such as Rolls-Royce with its MT30 gas turbines made in Bristol and Derby, and MTU with its German diesel engines, are also likely to benefit.

This deal has the status of an agreement between governments, and BAE has yet to hold detailed negotiations with the Norwegians. With much still to be decided, it’s too early to be precise about the exact impact on profits and jobs that will flow from the deal.

But the signs are it will underpin UK naval shipbuilding well into the 2040s.

UK defence manufacturing contributes more than £10bn to the economy – accounting for about 0.5% of UK economic output. That looks set to grow, but it won’t be clear until 2030 if the 4,000 jobs dangled by the government on the Clyde and in supply chains materialise.

This is certain: in a topsy-turvy world where the unexpected has become commonplace, a huge British shipbuilding win seems to fit the trend.

Suntory chief exits after cannabis supplement probe shocks Japan Inc

Matthew Bishop

One of Japan’s top business leaders, Takeshi Niinami, resigned last week as chief executive of drinks company Suntory Holdings after allegations he bought possibly illegal cannabis-based supplements and police raided his Tokyo home.

The board of the firm, which makes the eponymous whisky and owns other drinks brands, voted unanimously to request his resignation. He insists he is innocent.

Suntory whisky gained name recognition in the west after featuring in the film *Lost in Translation*: “For relaxing times, make it Suntory time,” repeats the protagonist, played by Bill Murray. Niinami allegedly preferred something else to help him relax. He says a friend had recommended the supplement to help with jet lag, and that he purchased it legally in the US.

Nobody has suggested Niinami bought actual cannabis. The unanswered question is whether the supplement contained small amounts of the cannabis derivative cannabidiol, a non-psychoactive compound which is legal in Japan, or also some traces of illegal THC, the psychoactive element in cannabis.

Compared with, say, having an affair with your direct report or underpaying stamp duty on your flat, it might seem like small fry. But the resignation has sent shock waves through the Japanese business and political world, where Niinami is hugely respected as chair of the Keizai Doyukai (Japanese Association of Corporate Executives) and an adviser to several Japanese prime ministers.

It’s not the first time something like this has happened in Japan: last year, Olympus Corp fired Stefan Kaufmann, its CEO, after unproven accusations of buying illegal drugs. But suspicions that there is more to this resignation than first meets the eye have been reinforced by the technical nature of his alleged offence.

Who tipped off the police, people are wondering, and why?

The immediate beneficiary of Niinami’s resignation is Nobuhiro Torii, who will now become CEO. He is the senior member of the family that owns Suntory, a great-grandson of the founder and was made president last December.

Takeshi Niinami said a friend recommended the supplements for jet lag. He insists he is innocent of any crime.
Newscom/Avalon

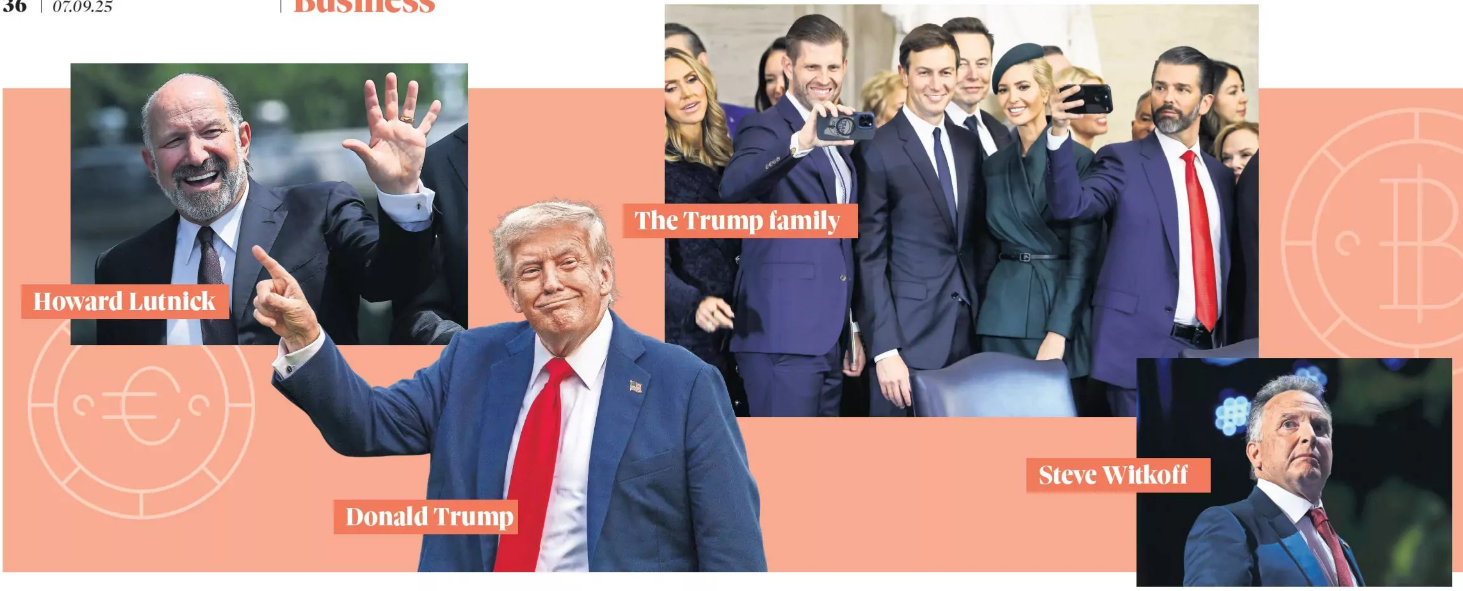
According to Bill Emmott, author of several books on the Japanese economy, this created “a two-headed leadership arrangement that looked unlikely to last. It is said that the two did not get on very well.”

Although in his 11 years as chief executive Niinami did a great job, the board may have already concluded this dual structure was doomed and the drug accusation “was a chance to accelerate an exit that was already inevitable”, Emmott adds.

It is rare for family-owned Japanese businesses to appoint an outsider as CEO. Niinami was the first non-family member to run Suntory since it was founded in 1899. Outsider CEOs in Japan are far more likely to be fired than family members. Yet, while it is plausible that Niinami’s downfall was ensured by someone inside the company alerting the police, there are other possibilities.

Niimani was not a man to mince his words, so may have made other enemies happy to take him down. It will be telling if his fellow corporate executives will allow him to continue as chair of the Keizai Doyukai, as he says he will do.

CEO scandals often provoke a knee-jerk reaction from boards. Is it time we all relaxed a little? Perhaps. Though Niimani may now prefer to do so with a new tipple.



The six warning signs as crypto is welcomed into the US mainstream

In a single week, the Trump family have increased their on-paper wealth by more than $6.5bn after Eric and Don Jr's crypto company American Bitcoin debuted on the Nasdaq and the family's stablecoin venture, World Liberty Financial, started selling tokens. As their enrichment continues, *Richard Lambert* examines the history of market hysteria and why crypto's rise under this president has all the alarm bells ringing

It is official: the path to future prosperity will be built on an exciting new platform of digital finance. That was the message of a series of recommendations published in July by a White House working group that, if implemented, "will ensure crypto becomes a hallmark of the new American Golden Age". And with the strong backing of the president and bipartisan support on Capitol Hill, it is more likely than not that these proposals will be pushed through.

The crypto markets were already surging ahead. The price of a bitcoin, by far the most popular crypto asset, has risen to about $110,000 (£83,000), nearly seven times where it stood at its low point at the end of 2022. Then there are the stablecoins, digital tokens that are supposed to be protected against wild fluctuations in their purchasing power because they are backed by conventional assets such as treasury bills. Tether, the market leader, said it was holding $127bn in US treasuries at the end of June as backing for the stablecoins it had sold. This makes it one of the world's largest investors in US government debt.

Overall, the value of the global crypto market has risen to more than $4tn, a rise of roughly three-fifths since the start of Donald Trump's second term.

But for anyone with an interest in financial history, parts of this story sound familiar. Red lights have been flashing in the crypto market for some time, and they are not getting any dimmer.

Here are six warning signals.

Location

Dodgy financial institutions have a natural tendency to set up shop in places where regulators take a relaxed view of life. The Panama papers, leaked in 2016, showed how hundreds of thousands of wealthy individuals, corporations and criminals were using offshore havens to conceal assets, avoid taxes and launder money. The crypto industry is much attracted to such spots. Before it went bust, the crypto exchange FTX was based in the Bahamas, a place that has welcomed financial adventurers since the pirate Blackbeard cast his anchor there in 1716. FTX's former boss, Sam Bankman-Fried, is serving 25 years on various fraud charges.

Tether, which has been described as the quasi-central bank of crypto, moved its headquarters earlier this year from the British Virgin Islands to El Salvador.

With Trump rolling out the red carpet, it is possible crypto companies will start to relocate to the US. The White House has instructed regulators to "embrace the opportunity of digital assets", and appointments are being made with that in mind, starting with Paul Atkins, the new crypto-supporting chair of the US Securities and Exchange Commission. But if you are an investor rather than an operator, friendly regulators have obvious drawbacks.

Corruption

In the early 18th century, the South Sea Company was determined to become a central part of Britain's financial establishment. The Prince of Wales was appointed to the post of governor of the company in 1715, followed a few years later by the king himself, who enjoyed a significant shareholding in the company.

After the South Sea bubble burst in September 1720, it emerged that in the previous few years the company had laid out about £1m – an astonishing sum in those days – in the form of bribes to politicians, the king's mistress and other people of influence.

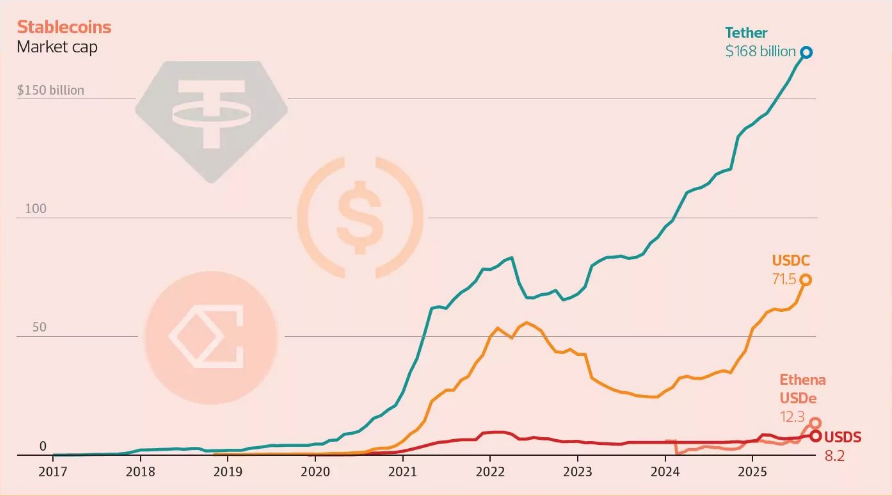
Another way to do the job: employ members of parliament and peers as your company directors. Nearly 30 MPs were on the boards of South American mining companies during the speculative boom of the 1820s. The writer Harriet Martineau deplored "the decline of the character of the House of Commons" where too many had "sacrificed their legislative conscience to the interests of themselves and their friends".

> *Transparency is a quality that really matters in the financial business – but it's not a great feature of the crypto world*

Nothing like that could happen today, of course. But the crypto industry is estimated to have accounted for almost half of all corporate spending in last year's US election. It also put at least $10m into Trump's inauguration fund.

So the US administration is now full of crypto enthusiasts. Just one example – Howard Lutnick, the secretary of commerce, was the former boss of Cantor Fitzgerald, a significant shareholder in Tether, and his two sons are running the business today.

Meanwhile, the United States's very own Prince of Wales, Donald Trump Jr, is busy building



Source: Coinmarketcap

Changpeng Zhao

Sam Bankman-Fried

LEFT
Eric and Don Jr outside the Nasdaq MarketSite in New York last month.

The crypto factor

The Trump family generated as much as $5bn in paper wealth on Monday after putting digital tokens from their crypto venture, **World Liberty Financial**, up for sale. Donald Trump said last year that the company would help "make America the crypto capital of the world". The US president's digital tokens are thought to be worth more than his property holdings.

On Wednesday, **American Bitcoin**, a crypto company linked to Donald Trump Jr and Eric Trump, debuted on the Nasdaq. Shares more than doubled, valuing the brothers' stake at $1.5bn.

Last month, **Trump Media & Technology Group**, the company behind the social media app Truth Social, announced a deal with Crypto.com to set up a new public company that would buy and hold $6.4bn of the exchange's in-house digital coin.

Three days before Donald Trump was elected for a second term, he announced his own meme coin, **$TRUMP**, which is hosted on the Solana blockchain. Within three weeks, it had netted more than $300m in fees. The *New Yorker* estimates that the meme coin, alongside **$MELANIA**, has yielded a profit of $385m for the Trump family.

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the family's crypto empire with a dizzying array of transactions in the past few months. The *New Yorker* magazine estimated in August that the president's family had already profited to the tune of $2.4bn in various crypto businesses by trading on his re-election to the presidency.

Buying the right crypto assets is a way to the president's heart. Changpeng Zhao, the boss of the world's largest crypto exchange, Binance, served four months in prison last year for money-laundering violations and is hoping for a pardon from the US president. As luck would have it, an Abu Dhabi company has chosen a stablecoin backed by the Trump family for its $2bn investment in Binance.

And the president has room for manoeuvre. The Genius Aact, setting out regulations for trading in stablecoins, was approved in July. Among other things, it included conflict-of-interest provision barring members of Congress and federal employees from entering the stablecoin business. There was one exemption: the president himself.

Transparency

Transparency is a quality that really matters in the financial business – but it's not a great feature of the crypto world.

Louis D Brandeis, a former US supreme court justice, made the point back in 1913. Building his case against the secretive ways of the big Wall Street money trusts, he famously argued: "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman."

When they are not there, bad things can happen. Bernie Madoff was an investment manager who swindled thousands of clients out of billions of dollars and who operated through opaque disclosures signed off by an obscure accounting firm. He also made sure that no outsiders looked at the books. In 2009, he was sentenced to 150 years in prison, where he died 12 years later.

Largely unregulated and with thousands of new entrants in the market, the crypto industry is not much bothered with transparency. In particular, potential conflicts of interest are everywhere.

For example, Bankman-Fried ran a hedge fund that was one of the biggest traders on his crypto exchange. In the words of journalist Zeke Faux: "Imagine if the top executives of an online poker site also entered in big stakes tournaments – the temptation to cheat by peeking at other players' cards would be huge."

It certainly proved too much for Bankman-Fried. After the crash, it emerged that billions of dollars had been diverted from the exchange's customer deposits to help bail out the hedge fund.

That was an extreme example, but there are obvious risks elsewhere. The Trump family is now in almost every corner of the business – bitcoin, stablecoins, and tokens, with no obvious guardrails to protect against potential conflicts of interest. In one recent transaction, World Liberty Financial (WLF), a Trump-backed business, acquired shares in a publicly listed company that in turn was going to buy $1.5bn of WLF's crypto tokens. The president is listed as "co-founder emeritus" of WLF as is his Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, while other co-founders include Trump's three sons and two of Witkoff's sons. If that all looks very cosy, that's because it is.

When it comes to disclosure, Tether has been in existence for more than 10 years and has become a large financial institution. Yet it has never published a fully audited set of accounts. Instead, it produces what it calls an "attestation", signed by accountancy group BDO. Close examination of the footnotes reveals that the statement amounts to not very much at all.

Critics have been grumbling about this for years, but nobody seems to care. In August, Tether hired the former director of the White House crypto council as a strategic adviser.

Financial Innovation

Crypto enthusiasts are thrilled by the idea of innovation. This is how the White House policy paper starts: "The American story is one of innovation. From the railroads that linked sea to shining sea, to the internet that connected the entire world, American entrepreneurs have led the buildout of next generation technologies in every generation since our founding. Crypto should be no different."

History shows that innovation in finance is by no means an unmixed blessing. In the spring of 1637, a Dutch merchant called François Koster paid 6,650 guilders for a small collection of tulip bulbs. This was at a time when a family might live for a year on about 300 guilders. Tulips had become a sophisticated market, based on promissory notes rather than boxes of brown bulbs. Koster had only to make a down payment of roughly an eighth of the purchase price, and intended to sell the notes for a profit before the rest of the money was due. Sadly for him, the tulip mania came to a sudden end a few weeks later, and he was ruined. John Law was one of history's great financial innovators (he was also a brilliant gambler, and a swordsman, who escaped from Newgate prison after killing an adversary in a duel). His book, *Money and Trade Considered*, published in 1705, was generations ahead of its time.

Starting in 1716, Law's plan to take over the national debt of France was as beautiful as it was daring, and it might have worked too if trading in his Mississippi Company had not got a little out of hand on the Paris stock exchange. When it all blew up in 1720, Law escaped from France with his life, leaving a wrecked economy behind him.

More recently, financial innovation undoubtedly played a part in the banking crash of 2008-9. Credit default swaps and a host of other complex products seemed to make financial risks disappear – until they didn't.

The question that was asked then about financial innovation could be put to the crypto industry today: what is its social use? Would anyone outside the world of finance be worse off if it did exist? As Paul Volcker, the former chair of the Federal Reserve, growled in 2009: "The most important financial innovation I have seen in the last 20 years is the ATM."

'Irrational exuberance'

A fifth red light can be summed up by two words uttered in 1996 by Alan Greenspan, then chair of the Fed, as the dotcom bubble was beginning to inflate: "irrational exuberance". This has been a feature of all financial manias in the past, and it is certainly becoming visible in the crypto sector today.

For example, over the past year roughly 150 US companies from a variety of sectors have raised money through debt and equity issues to buy bitcoin and similar assets: they call themselves bitcoin treasury companies. The idea is to fire up their share price by offering investors an easy way into crypto with the extra boost of financial

Continued on page 38 >>

Any Other Business

By Matthew Bishop

Big Tech woos Trumps to fend off the big stick

Attempts to crawl higher up the White House's infamous "corporate loyalty list" continue. The Titans of Tech turned out en masse at Thursday's dinner with the president to celebrate Melania Trump's new AI in education initiative. They were on their best behaviour (Elon Musk wisely sent a substitute) because relations between big tech firms and the government are at a delicate moment.

The dinner speech of Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google and its parent company Alphabet, oozed appreciation of the First Couple. Google had dodged a bullet a couple of days earlier. Having been convicted previously of market dominance in online search, the judge considering punishment and remedies declined either to break up the firm by forcing it to sell its Chrome browser, or to stop it paying Apple a fortune to promote Google products on its gadgets. Google's share price (and Apple's) jumped on the news. After the verdict, the US government said it remains determined to keep going after Google and other tech monopolists, including by seeking the sort of classic antitrust enforcement that broke up JD Rockefeller's Standard Oil in the 1920s and telecoms giant AT&T in the 1970s.

Yet this administration may see antitrust differently from its predecessors: less about protecting consumers, more about projecting political power over big business. After the recent treatment of Intel it would surprise no tech leader sucking up to Trump last week if he were to use the threat of pursuing a break-up to get them to do his bidding in all sorts of once unthinkable ways, including selling the government cut-price equity stakes in their companies.

Technology's titans flocked to the White House dinner – but did they find it hard to swallow? Saul Loeb/Getty

Firms must hit 1% giving goal

Most British businesses are disengaged from meaningful investment in their community. Among the 923,000 UK businesses with a turnover of at least £250,000, only a quarter gave to charity in 2024, according to last week's corporate giving 2025 report by the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF).

Social capital in communities across the land has been badly depleted over many years. Unless business helps to build it up, especially in the worst-affected places, financial capital is unlikely to generate the returns it needs from investing in local businesses.

CAF makes three excellent proposals to get things moving in a better direction. First, the decision to drop mandatory reporting of giving by listed companies was a mistake; it should be restored. Transparency can drive greater activity.

Second, when firms do give, they should use a strategic community investment framework that treats giving in the same rigorous way as other business strategies, as the evidence suggests this has far greater positive impact.

Third, every FTSE 100 company should give away at least 1% of profits every year. In 2024, only 24 did so (down from 28 a year earlier), led by Sainsbury's (13% of profits) and GSK (10%). Achieving that 1% goal could make a huge difference.

CEOs face same censure as stars over crimes and misdemeanours

Not so long ago, America's puritanical attitude to CEO naughtiness was regarded on this side of the Atlantic as an oddity. For instance, back in 2003, "the European media had great fun when crusty old Harry Stonecipher, who had been brought in to clean up Boeing's ethics, promptly had to resign over a relationship with a subordinate", recalls Yale management professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, adding "it wouldn't have been such a big deal over there."

Today, CEOs losing jobs over personal indiscretions is a global trend. From the US corporate couple canoodling at a Coldplay concert and the now ex-CEO of European food giant Nestlé fired last week owing to an affair with a direct report (he denies the allegations), to the CEO of Japanese drinks giant Suntory, forced out over allegations he bought suspected illegal supplements (he also denies any wrongdoing).

Michael Aldous, co-author of a new book, *The CEO*, attributes this shift to three main factors. First, CEOs increasingly are public figures, even celebrities, with all that implies in terms of high expectations and vulnerability to tall poppy syndrome. Second, the CEO job has been professionalised and codified; what it means to abuse power or lie is now clearly defined and easier to detect (as Nestlé's CEO discovered when he failed to disclose his in-house relationship). Above all, institutional shareholders have become more powerful, taking a dim view of CEO behaviour that risks a PR disaster or potentially costly lawsuit. Which is good corporate governance, of course.

How different from the late 1980s, when legendary Burton's boss Sir Ralph Halpern was nicknamed "five times a night" after his affair with a model became public. Not only did he keep his job (and, remarkably, his marriage), a shareholder at the company AGM soon after declared him "the second greatest Englishman, after Churchill".

Crypto party may go on, despite the warning signs

>> Continued from page 37

engineering – and so far it seems to be working. The model is a company called Strategy, which was recently valued at more than $100bn. Remarkably enough, that is a lot more than the value of the bitcoin it actually owns.

The fun fact is that this looks very like the notorious investment trust business launched by Goldman Sachs just as the Wall Street equity market was reaching rocket speed in 1928. Boosted by Goldman Sach's own purchases and with some nifty deal-making, the shares reached $222 by February 1929, at which point the business was valued at roughly twice its net assets. Eight months later came the great crash, and a few years later you could pick them up for 50 cents. It took Goldman Sachs decades to recover its reputation.

Old-time banks are back?

Paul Krugman, the Nobel prize-winning economist, likens stablecoin issuers to banks back in the days before the US civil war, when gold and silver were the only official forms of money and there was no central bank in Washington. Back then, banks issued paper currency which they promised to redeem for gold and silver, in just the way that stablecoin companies today issue tokens they promise to redeem for dollars. Some of these banks served a useful purpose, others were intent only on fraud.

As is the case with stablecoins, these supposed antebellum banks were largely unregulated, and there were no safety nets for customers when they failed. So the system repeatedly experienced panics with people rushing to get their money out if they possibly could.

But there is a crucial difference. Unlike antebellum bank notes, Krugman says, stablecoins do not serve any useful purpose. They cannot be used to make ordinary purchases, and there is nothing you can do with them that cannot be done more easily and with more security than with a MasterCard or Visa. If things go wrong, there are no government guarantees to back the customer.

So why buy them?

Krugman's answer is blunt. "The only economic reason for stablecoins is to facilitate criminal activity." That is too harsh a view. Stablecoins can be useful for merchants operating in countries with broken-down banking systems who could not otherwise move their money across borders. And if you want to speculate in crypto, stablecoins are a handy way into the marketplace.

The White House claims that only a tiny fraction of digital asset activity is to do with crime. Against that, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime said last year that "powerful criminal networks have developed a range of sophisticated mechanisms, structures and techniques to launder stolen funds, particularly using stablecoins". Tether was the "preferred choice" for Asian crime syndicates servicing a wide range of criminals in and beyond the region.

With all these warning lights from history, will the crypto story end in tears? The answer is – probably not. Nearly 400 years after tulip mania, there is a steady if dull tulip trade in Amsterdam. The same may well be true for crypto over the long term. And with the huge push coming from the Trump administration, today's party may well go on for some while to come. But this seems a good moment to recall the words of the journalist Walter Bagehot, written in 1873: "The good times too, of high price, almost always engender much fraud. All people are most credulous when they are most happy; and when much money has just been made, when some people are really making it, when most people think they are making it, there is a huge opportunity for ingenious mendacity. Almost everything will be believed for a little while, and long before discovery, the worst and most adroit deceivers are geographically or legally beyond the reach of punishment."

Nothing much changes in the world of finance.

Sir Richard Lambert was editor of the Financial Times and chair of the British Museum. He is chair of The Observer's editorial board

Weather

UK and Ireland

	Today Low	Today High	Monday Low	Monday High	Tuesday Low	Tuesday High
Belfast	17	19	9	16	9	17
Birmingham	14	22	11	19	8	18
Bristol	16	20	11	18	10	17
Dover	15	25	15	20	11	19
Edinburgh	15	21	11	18	8	19
Glasgow	15	20	10	17	8	18
Inverness	14	22	11	19	6	19
Leeds	14	22	12	18	9	19
Leicester	14	24	12	19	9	19
Liverpool	16	21	12	19	9	20
London	15	25	13	22	10	21
Manchester	17	21	12	18	9	19
Newcastle	14	21	11	19	7	19
Norwich	15	26	13	21	9	21
Plymouth	16	19	12	18	13	17
Swansea	17	19	11	17	12	17

Europe today

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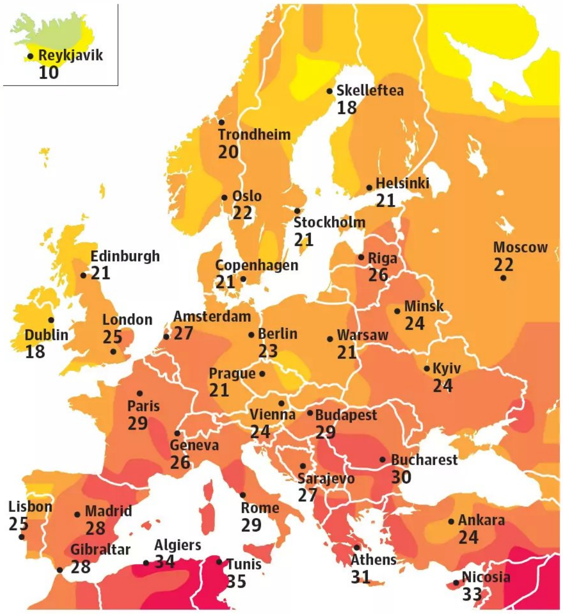
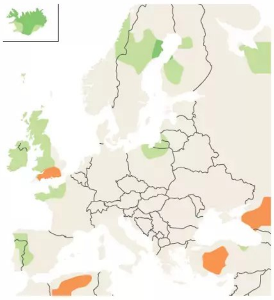

Reykjavik 10
Skelleftea 18
Trondheim 20
Helsinki 21
Oslo 22
Stockholm 21
Riga 26
Moscow 22
Edinburgh 21
Copenhagen 21
Minsk 24
London 25
Amsterdam 27
Berlin 23
Dublin 18
Warsaw 21
Prague 21
Kyiv 24
Paris 29
Vienna 24
Budapest 29
Geneva 26
Bucharest 30
Sarajevo 27
Lisbon 25
Madrid 28
Rome 29
Ankara 24
Algiers 34
Gibraltar 28
Tunis 35
Athens 31
Nicosia 33

Temperatures °C (shown are highs for today)

-20 -15 -10 -5 0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35



Precipitation today

Showers Storms Rain Flurries Snow Ice

Lighting up

	Today	Monday
Belfast	2001 to 0645	1959 to 0647
Birmingham	1941 to 0630	1938 to 0632
Bristol	1943 to 0635	1941 to 0637
Dover	1927 to 0619	1925 to 0621
Edinburgh	1952 to 0632	1949 to 0634
Glasgow	1956 to 0636	1953 to 0638
Inverness	1957 to 0632	1954 to 0634
Leeds	1941 to 0627	1939 to 0629
London	1934 to 0626	1932 to 0627
Manchester	1944 to 0631	1941 to 0633
Newcastle	1944 to 0626	1941 to 0628
Plymouth	1948 to 0642	1945 to 0643
Swansea	1949 to 0640	1947 to 0642

High tides

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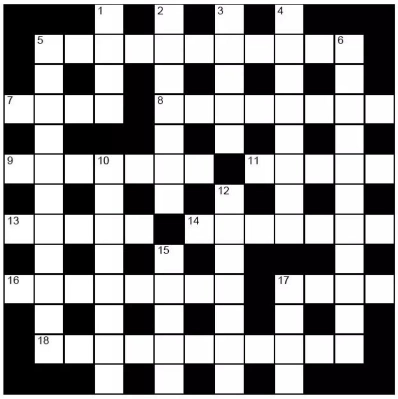
	Today				Monday				Tuesday			
Aberdeen	01:36	4.2m	14:11	4.2m	02:11	4.4m	14:47	4.3m	02:47	4.6m	15:23	4.4m
Belfast	11:39	3.3m	23:41	3.5m	12:10	3.4m	---	---	00:16	3.7m	12:45	3.4m
Dover	11:35	6.7m	23:54	6.6m	12:12	6.9m	---	---	00:31	6.8m	12:49	7.1m
Galway	05:43	4.8m	17:50	5.2m	06:17	5.1m	18:27	5.4m	06:52	5.2m	19:06	5.5m
Harwich	00:08	3.9m	12:19	3.9m	00:48	4.0m	12:58	4.0m	01:27	4.1m	13:35	4.1m
Holyhead	10:58	5.4m	23:06	5.8m	11:32	5.6m	23:42	6.0m	12:08	5.7m	---	---
Hull	06:36	7.4m	19:16	7.3m	07:15	7.7m	19:53	7.6m	07:54	8.0m	20:30	7.7m
Leith	02:55	5.4m	15:25	5.5m	03:30	5.7m	16:01	5.7m	04:06	5.9m	16:38	5.8m
Liverpool	11:45	9.0m	23:56	9.5m	12:21	9.3m	---	---	00:33	9.8m	12:58	9.5m
London	02:13	6.8m	14:35	6.8m	02:55	7.1m	15:14	7.0m	03:35	7.2m	15:52	7.2m
North Shields	03:42	5.0m	16:16	5.0m	04:16	5.3m	16:51	5.2m	04:52	5.4m	17:28	5.2m
Penzance	05:08	5.3m	17:25	5.6m	05:45	5.5m	18:03	5.8m	06:23	5.6m	18:42	5.9m
Plymouth	06:18	5.1m	18:32	5.5m	07:01	5.3m	19:14	5.6m	07:42	5.4m	19:56	5.7m
Portsmouth	12:07	4.7m	---	---	00:11	4.6m	12:42	4.8m	00:47	4.8m	13:19	4.9m
Southport	11:20	8.7m	23:31	9.2m	12:02	9.0m	---	---	00:14	9.5m	12:39	9.2m
Weymouth	07:29	1.9m	19:44	2.2m	08:16	2.0m	20:30	2.3m	08:59	2.2m	21:13	2.3m
Wick	12:05	3.3m	---	---	00:06	3.6m	12:43	3.5m	00:46	3.8m	13:21	3.5m

Around the world

	Today			Monday		
	Low	High	Weather	Low	High	Weather
Amsterdam	14	27	fair	17	22	sunny
Athens	22	31	sunny	22	31	sunny
Auckland	11	16	showers	7	16	sunny
Baghdad	27	44	haze	27	45	sunny
Beijing	16	30	sunny	16	31	sunny
Belgrade	16	30	sunny	15	31	fair
Berlin	10	23	sunny	11	24	sunny
Brussels	12	29	sunny	17	23	fair
Budapest	12	29	sunny	16	30	sunny
Buenos Aires	4	16	fair	9	17	cloudy
Cairo	24	33	haze	23	32	haze
Cape Town	12	20	fair	11	26	sunny
Copenhagen	11	21	sunny	13	21	showers
Dublin	17	18	rain	9	17	showers
Geneva	10	26	sunny	15	22	storms
Gibraltar	22	28	fair	22	28	sunny
Helsinki	15	21	fair	14	22	cloudy
Hong Kong	29	33	storms	28	32	showers
Istanbul	20	27	cloudy	20	27	fair
Jerusalem	20	28	sunny	19	28	sunny
Kingston	27	33	storms	27	33	fair
Kolkata	27	34	showers	27	34	cloudy
Kyiv	13	24	fair	15	24	fair
Los Angeles	19	33	sunny	19	30	fair
Madrid	21	28	cloudy	16	29	haze
Melbourne	15	20	showers	11	21	sunny
Mexico City	14	24	cloudy	14	24	fair
Miami	25	32	storms	25	32	storms
Moscow	11	22	sunny	11	22	sunny
Nairobi	13	26	haze	13	26	haze
Nassau	25	32	fair	25	32	storms
New York City	17	22	rain	15	23	sunny
Oslo	12	22	fair	11	22	fair
Ottawa	10	19	showers	7	19	sunny
Paris	14	29	fair	16	23	fair
Prague	9	21	sunny	9	22	sunny
Riga	16	26	fair	15	25	sunny
Rio de Janeiro	19	21	cloudy	19	25	fair
Rome	16	29	sunny	16	28	fair
Seoul	24	30	cloudy	20	30	cloudy
Singapore	26	30	storms	26	29	storms
Sydney	11	25	windy	16	29	sunny
Tokyo	25	32	sunny	26	33	sunny
Toronto	11	18	showers	9	19	fair
Vancouver	16	21	fair	15	21	cloudy
Vienna	11	24	sunny	12	27	fair
Warsaw	15	21	fair	15	25	sunny
Washington	18	25	fair	15	25	sunny

Speedy crossword No. 1,561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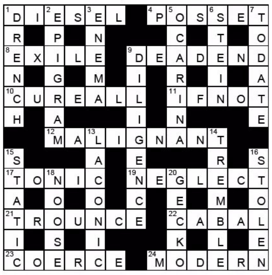
Across

5 Unauthorised absence (6,5)
7 Skin condition (4)
8 Tirade (8)
9 Tidal wave (7)
11 Scuffle (5)
13 In the offing (5)
14 Minor role (3,4)
16 Celebratory gesture (4-4)
17 Slightly open (4)
18 Compose off the cuff (11)

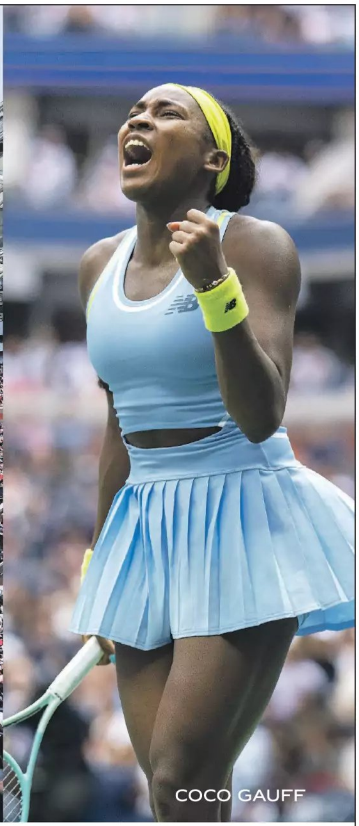
Down

1 Yield (4)
2 College (7)
3 Take great pleasure in (5)
4 Bobby pin (8)
5 Grim reality (5,2,4)
6 Hard physical work (5,6)
10 Newcomer, novice (8)
12 Andiron (7)
15 Gadget (5)
17 Similar (4)

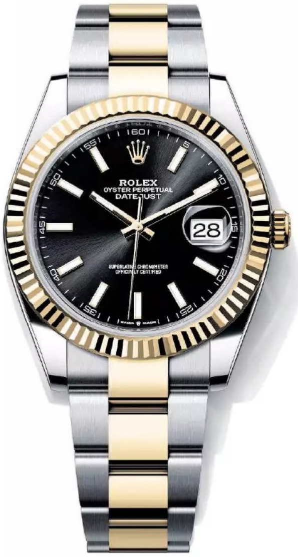
SOLUTION No. 1,560


DIESEL POSSET
EXILE DEADEND
CUREALL IFNOT
MALIGNANT
TONIC NEGLECT
TROUNCE CABAL
COERCE MODERN

JANNIK SINNER



REACH FOR THE CROWN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DATEJUST
28
SUPERLATIVE CHRONOMETER
OFFICIALLY CERTIFIED

THE DATEJUST

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ROLEX

The Observer Sport

Postcards from the Tour of Britain, by George Simms

Red Roses bloom again, by Paul Hayward

The Levy legacy, by Rory Smith

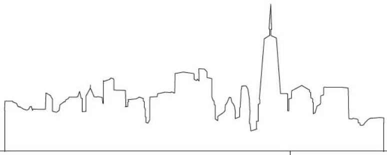
Shooting star

Arsenal's £1m signing lights up the Emirates

The Observer
07.09.25

This week

Reporting by Jessy Parker Humphreys in New York



The week in brief

Ten Hag 'surprised' to be sacked after three games

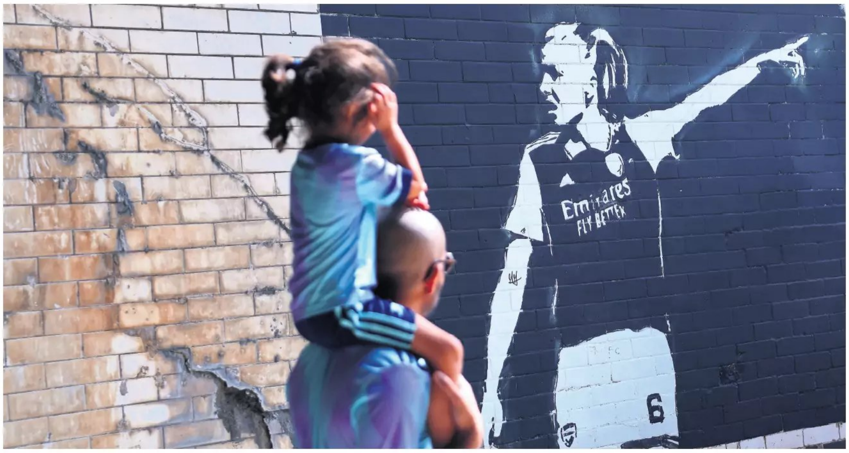
Erik ten Hag's career as head coach at Bayer Leverkusen was short-lived as he was sacked after only three games in charge. The Dutchman, 55, had been appointed as Xabi Alonso's successor, after the Spaniard joined Real Madrid over the summer, but his new club lost their first two Bundesliga games. "A new coach deserves the space to implement his vision," said Ten Hag, who said the sacking was "a complete surprise". His dismissal completed a trilogy of sackings of former Manchester United managers. José Mourinho and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer were also sacked by Fernerbahce and Besiktas.
Levy's true value to Spurs, page 8

1:18.792

The fastest ever Formula One lap, driven by Max Verstappen yesterday to earn pole at the Italian Grand Prix, an average speed of 164.484mph

Scots make positive start in bid to make World Cup

Scotland's hopes of qualifying for a first World Cup since 1998 got off to a positive start when they drew 0-0 in Denmark in their opening qualifier. The match was arguably their trickiest of a group that also contains Greece and Belarus, who they play on Monday, although they have lost heavily to Greece recently. Wales beat Kazakhstan 1-0, with Kieffer Moore the first Wrexham player to score for them since 2006, to go top of their group though Belgium and North Macedonia have games in hand. Northern Ireland won 3-1 against Luxembourg, putting them top ahead of Slovakia, who handed Germany their first away World Cup qualifying loss.
England 2 Andorra 0, page 7



***Role model:** A young fan makes their way to watch Arsenal's opening win in the Women's Super League past a mural of England and Arsenal captain Leah Williamson. For Arsenal 5 London City 1, see page 5.* Maja Hitij/Getty Images

Bad start for Mahomes and his disorganised Chiefs

The Los Angeles Chargers beat Super Bowl runners-up Kansas City Chiefs 27-21 as they got their NFL season under way in São Paulo, Brazil. Quarterback Justin Herbert (below) threw three touchdowns and passed for 318 yards as the Chargers recorded their first win over the Chiefs since 2021. And despite Patrick Mahomes's best efforts to haul them back into it, the Chiefs looked disorganised in offense and defense, and conceded 10 penalties. The Chiefs host a Super Bowl rematch next Sunday as the Philadelphia Eagles travel to Missouri. With less than 12% of teams who lose their first two games making the post-season, the pressure will be on.
The Cowboys' demise, page 13

Overheard

'It's great for tennis'

Carlos Alcaraz on US president Donald Trump attending today's men's US Open final in New York

Injured icon Clark out for rest of WNBA season

Caitlin Clark is ruled out for the rest of the WNBA season having failed to recover from a groin injury that has kept her sidelined for two months already. The 2024 rookie of the year last played for the Indiana Fever in July in a 85-77 win over the Connecticut Sun, but will be unable to help her team as they battle to make the play-offs. Clark, the overwhelming star of women's basketball, averaged 16.5 points, 8.8 assists, and five rebounds in her 13 games this season. The Fever have two more regular season games, against the Washington Mystics and the Minnesota Lynx, to try to secure a play-off place.

Chelsea's winning start in bid to crack period stigma

Chelsea began their Women's Super League campaign with a 2-1 win over Manchester City but it also marked the start of their new shorts sponsorship. Partnering with Here We Flo, a period care brand, the team wore shorts with red period stains on the back to tackle stigma around menstruation. The campaign looks to call out the use of the colour blue to represent blood in period adverts, with 90% of women believing periods aren't shown accurately. Concerns around periods have led to a number of women's football teams choosing to move away white shorts in order to help their players feel more comfortable.
Women's Super League, pages 4-6

Delay pushes back threat of rugby's R360 breakaway

A proposed breakaway rugby union competition looks to have hit the buffers after its application to be sanctioned by World Rugby was pushed back. R360 aims to create a global franchise league with 12 teams, but a proposed September 2026 launch appears unlikely, although R360 insists it is on track. World Rugby has to approve any cross-border competitions in order to ensure compliance with a range of legal, player safety and contractual requirements. It was due to hear the application this month but will not do so until next June.

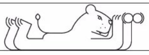
Tearful Messi not sure if he will make World Cup

Lionel Messi cast doubts over his involvement in the 2026 World Cup as he spoke to reporters following Argentina's 3-0 win over Venezuela. Messi was reduced to tears as fans chanted his name ahead of the kick-off that had been officially billed as his last home game for his national side. "Because of my age, the most logical thing is that I won't make it," he said, after scoring twice. "I go day by day, going by how I feel. When I feel good, I enjoy it, but when I don't, honestly, I don't have a good time, so I prefer not to be there if I don't feel good. So we'll see. I haven't made a decision about the World Cup."

World Series winner Johnson dies aged 82

Davey Johnson, the manager of the New York Mets when they beat the Boston Red Sox in the 1986 World Series has died, aged 82. Johnson also won the World Series twice with the Baltimore Orioles as a player but he was best known for leading the Mets to a famous comeback victory in what is regarded as one of the greatest World Series.

Said & done *by Andrew Butler*



Golden oldie

National League South side Dorking Wanderers came within a day of playing 54-year-old fan Terry Dunn in goal for their match against AFC Totton. The keeper hadn't played for 28 years but answered the club's SOS following an injury crisis. However, the club signed Joe Wright from Barnet on an emergency loan and won the game 2-1.

Closed Slam shop

In the past 20 years, only 10 of the 79 men's tennis grand slam titles have been won by players not named Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Carlos Alcaraz or Jannik Sinner. Alcaraz and Sinner meeting in today's US Open final means the pair will have won the past eight Grand Slam titles between them.

Keep it in the family

Daníel Guðjohnsen (left) replacing his brother Andri meant he became the fifth member of the Gudjohnsen family to represent Iceland when he came on in his country's 5-0 win over Azerbaijan. The 19-year-old follows in the footsteps his father, Eiður, and grandfather, Arnór. Their other brother Sveinn Aron has also been capped 20 times.

Long way home

The 878-mile round trip that Truro City had to make for their away match against Carlisle United yesterday set a new record for distance travelled to an English match. And they lost 3-0. The National League club will break the record again twice this season when they travel to Hartlepool (890 miles) and Gateshead (930).

Paul Hayward

Footballers' financial naivety has put them on the losing side

The revelation that former top-flight players lost millions in investments is a sad tale of misplaced trust, but it's also a colossal failure of diligence on the part of those involved

Trust betrayed clockwise from left Danny Murphy, Brian Deane, Michael Thomas and Tommy Johnson.
BBC

In a week when a striker moved from Newcastle to Liverpool for £125m and Premier League clubs passed £3 billion in summer spending, a BBC film showed an earlier generation of stars outside the High Court chanting: "What do we want? Justice. When do we want it? Now."

There are 11 in the group ('V11'), and a couple of hundred more unseen. Some look broken. In the BBC documentary, Danny Murphy speaks of "the shame, embarrassment and guilt" from crushing investment losses and an average tax bill among the group of £1m. "People will assume I've got another four [million pounds]," says Murphy, who lost that amount. "Well, I 'aven't."

Former Fulham player Sean Davis sought refuge on the riverbank with his fishing rod but you could see in his eyes it was no real sanctuary. Big-name players who had thrilled Premier League crowds were now united in a new kind of team: a survival crew, pleading with HM Revenue & Customs to go easy on the huge amounts of tax they owe.

No hesitation was shown in the programme – Football's Financial Shame: The Story of the V11 – in portraying the players as victims, which they were. Dozens lost fortunes on investment schemes placed in front of them in the 1990s and 2000s by Kingsbridge Asset Management, run by David McKee and Kevin McMenamin, who "deny any wrongdoing".

A three-year investigation by the City of London Police concluded "at Commander level" that there was insufficient evidence to secure a conviction against Kingsbridge.

But the players were still described as "victims of crime," a status they have clung to in their pleas for help.

With the ambiguity in that police report, the players were pitched into a shadow world where there was no legal recourse against Kingsbridge, but tax bills were rolling in because the players' names were on the investments. So far, so recognisable as a tableau of personal tragedy.

Many of the players the BBC spoke to expected to be wiped out – to lose their homes.

And with the obliteration of all they had amassed came damage to their health and sanity. Davis spoke of alcohol being a pressure valve until he woke up in the morning wanting to kill himself.

The public are left with a thorny choice: to regard the "financial abuse" as a national scandal or a sad case of naivety, a failure of curiosity on schemes that were plainly too good to be true.

"We trusted them" is a poor defence. But observing this foreseeable calamity unfold, one wonders how much longer Britain can avoid adding a personal finance GCSE to the national curriculum.

No child should leave school with zero understanding of savings, pensions, account management and all the pitfalls – especially in this age of industrialised scams.

Rich people losing everything in the act of trying to get even richer tends not to invite public sympathy, especially when tax relief has been misused, as it was in the flawed tax credits for film investments introduced by the then Chancellor Gordon Brown in 1997.

From the film scheme, the V11 group were led into high-risk property schemes with deferred tax charges. Some of the buildings they invested in were grotesquely overvalued. Huge commissions were extracted. Bank loans were added to the players' investment funds, adding to their complexity.

"What the government didn't envisage was the tax advantages would be abused and turned into a financial product," investment fraud lawyer Ben Rees told the BBC.

"I thought they knew better than me," Brian Deane said of those advising him. Murphy, who signed "stacks" of papers without looking properly, claimed "thousands of football players have been manipulated by financial advisors and had their money taken."
A forensic handwriting expert said he saw "strong evidence" of players' signatures being forged on documents.

When aggressive misuse of tax relief was challenged in court, HMRC won the right to have them declared illegal. But that process took a decade or more. Then the "brown letters" started landing on doormats – tax bills many of the players say they had no chance of paying (many wealthier players have been able to settle).

This is a story of financial illiteracy and a colossal failure of diligence on the part of the players, whose trust was abused. As victims of "financial grooming" they are right to campaign for a change in the law to protect victims of fraud.

But V11's doom loop is that the HMRC tax bills are legally valid – and enforceable, however painful it is to witness their distress. Under current law, they aren't being hounded for spurious charges, however broad the exploitation.

In a statement HMRC said: "We have a duty to collect tax when it is legally due. We recognise that dealing with an enquiry and a large tax liability can be stressful and we are absolutely committed to identifying and supporting customers who need extra help."

With HMRC in hot pursuit, there is a haunting poignancy to the most famous words in the story of Michael Thomas, who won the league title for Arsenal in 1989. The line became true of his wealth, his life. As Thomas surged into Liverpool's penalty box to score, the commentator Brian Moore called out: "It's up for grabs now."

Up for grabs: Michael Thomas scores the winner for Arsenal in 1989
Mark Leech/ Getty

Chelsea's show of quality a warning for rivals hoping to end domination

With talismanic Kerr leading the wealth of talent still to return, champions know their challengers will need new signings to step up quickly

Rory Smith
Stamford Bridge

Ups and downs: Maika Hamano celebrates, but it was despair for City's Khadija Shaw (below). *Charlotte Wilson/ Offside/Getty Images*

Sam Kerr's warm-up had amounted to not very much more than a gentle jog down the Stamford Bridge touchline before she realised the exercise was futile. She had been waiting for this moment for the better part of two years, ever since tearing her anterior cruciate ligament during a training camp in January 2024. Judging by the ripple of warm applause that greeted her appearance, so had plenty of others.

They would, in the event, get no more than a glimpse. Chelsea were holding on to a narrow lead against a spirited Manchester City team in the curtain-raiser to the Women's Super League season. Sonia Bompastor had one substitution window left. Her assistant, Théo Rivrin, caught Kerr's eye. And instructed her to tell Sjoeke Nüsken, the German international, that she was coming on to shut the game down.

Not quite able to hide her disappointment, Kerr – once not just the world's most fearsome striker but formerly its best-paid female player, too – trudged back to her seat. Alongside her was another unused substitute, the vastly experienced Norwegian international Guro Reiten. Bompastor's thinking, of course, was purely tactical. It was just a happy accident that it was also quite the flex.

It is just a few months since Bompastor, fresh from beating Manchester United in the FA Cup final to complete a domestic treble in her first season in England, encouraged Chelsea's rivals to continue investing, to raise the bar, to push her team as hard as they could. "Come with us," she urged them. Only with competition, she said, would Chelsea be able to "produce our best".

Over the course of the summer, the rest of the WSL have done their best to rise to Bompastor's challenge. Although figures from Fifa suggest the clubs of the NWSL, the United States' domestic women's league, have spent more money than anyone else in the last couple of months, England's teams have done their best to keep pace.

Arsenal, already the reigning European champions, broke the world transfer record to sign the Canadian forward Olivia Smith from Liverpool for £1.1m. London City Lionesses, newly promoted and pulsing with ambition, paid £1.4m to entice Grace Geyoro, the France midfielder, from Paris Saint-Germain earlier this week. It was quite the statement of intent, not least because Chelsea themselves have tried on several occasions in recent years to prise the 28-year-old from the French capital.

City, meanwhile, have added – among others – Grace Clinton and the German midfielder Sydney Lohmann to a squad that already includes not just a detachment of England internationals but Vivianne Miedema and Mary Fowler; Manchester United persuaded Jess Park to move across the city and enticed Fridolina Rolfö from Barcelona. The level of spending has made it hard to argue with the assertion that the WSL is "probably the strongest league in the world right now".

Chelsea, by contrast, had been relatively quiet. Bompastor had brought in Mara Alber, a promising German forward, and Livia Peng, the impressive Swiss goalkeeper, more as cover than competition for Hannah Hampton. Until the last breaths of the transfer window, Ellie Carpenter, the adventurous Australian full-back, was the only likely starter Chelsea had signed.

That all changed when the club finally managed to close a deal with Angel City to sign Alyssa Thompson, the US forward, as the deadline approached. She was unveiled to Stamford Bridge with a blast of a smoke machine on Friday evening; Chelsea had been working on her arrival, Bompastor revealed, for much of the summer.

Thompson's calibre is not in question. She was a first-round draft pick for Angel City just two years ago; she scored her first goal for the club while she was still in high school. She had played for her country before she had played professionally. She has, for some time, been regarded as the United States' next big thing.

It is testament to Chelsea's strength, then, that she faces considerable competition for a place. That Bompastor could afford to overlook both Kerr and Reiten was not the only indication of the club's extraordinary resources on offer on Friday.

Before the game started, all six of Chelsea's Lionesses were presented to the crowd, alongside Manchester City's contingent. Lucy Bronze strode on to the field clutching the European Championship trophy in her left hand. She was in her civvies, still recovering from the injury that she did all she could to ignore during England's glorious summer. Lauren James, too, was a spectator.

Watching on was Naomi Girma, the American defender who was – until this summer – the most expensive player in English history. Mayra Ramírez, the Colombian forward signed to replace Kerr during her absence, and Kadeisha Buchanan are nursing long-term injuries, but they should both return at some point this season.

Even among the riches of the WSL, the effect of Chelsea's strength in depth borders on overpowering; it is hard not to feel a faint Galáctica air around Bompastor's squad. This is a team, after all, that not only completed a clean sweep of domestic trophies last season, but did not suffer a single defeat over the entire WSL campaign. (City were, in fact, the only domestic side to beat them over 90 minutes, in the first leg of the Champions League quarter-finals; Chelsea duly beat them in the return.)

The arrival of Thompson and the return of Kerr – delayed as it may have been – only serves to make them look stronger. It is hard, even one game in, to see how anyone can touch them; City, for all their endeavour, ultimately fell some way short. On reflection, Bompastor may not have been urging their rivals to try to push them after the FA Cup final. She might, instead, have been daring them to keep up.

2-1

Chelsea
Beever-Jones (31)
Hamano (64)

Manchester City
Charles (70 og)

Venue: Stamford Bridge Attendance: 14,182

League goals: Elene Lete's efforts were out-beaten by Arsenal's four goals, who at this pace may well set up their first league title since 2019. John Walton/PA

Smith makes a big impression

New £1m forward hits stunning goal as Arsenal fight back to see off their new noisy neighbours

4-1

Arsenal	LC Lionesses
O. Smith (29) C. Kelly (45+2) S. Blackstenius (83) F. Maanum (84)	K. Asllani (17, pen)

Venue: Emirates Stadium Attendance: 38,142

Ben Coles
Emirates Stadium

The new noisy neighbours? London City Lionesses would love to become a regular irritant for Arsenal after their promotion to the Women's Super League for the first time, with far bigger ambitions than merely to stay in the division after their predecessors, Crystal Palace and Bristol City, lasted only a single season. This was game one but there were enough hints that London City's time in the top division will last a little longer as they forced the defending European champions to mount a first-half comeback before eventually cruising to victory.

No one could ignore the noise London City made earlier this week when reports suggested they had broken the world record for a women's transfer by signing France midfielder Grace Geyoro from Paris Saint-Germain. The fee may actually be closer to £1m, but backed by the US billionaire Michele Kang, it would hardly be a shock if London City do break the record in the near future, with the club moving at speed since Kang's purchase two years ago when they were on the verge of bankruptcy.

Kang last season persuaded Kosovare Asllani, the opening scorer at the Emirates from the penalty spot, and manager Jocelyn Prêcheur to leave teams regularly competing in the Champions League and join London City, who are without an affiliated men's team, in the second tier of English football.

By bringing Katie Zelem back to the WSL from Angel City FC – a double signing alongside Alanna Kennedy – and recruiting Daniëlle van de Donk from Lyon, they believe they have added the necessary experience. The hope will be that Nikita Parris can continue her goalscoring success having hit 12 in 28 games for Brighton last season, while London City openly pursued Arsenal forward Beth Mead, which gave this game extra spice.

Out of the new recruits – 16 players have joined on permanent deals, while the French defender Wassa Sangaré has signed on loan from Lyon – Prêcheur included a dozen new signings, with six starting. Ambition is one thing, but cohesion? That can take time. Kennedy at one point in the first half sent a promising pass out to the right wing only to find there was no one there.

But the visitors did start well, pressing effectively with Saki Kumagai building attacks from deep and Rofiat Imuran looking comfortable at left-back. Asllani, after being fouled in the box by Arsenal's Katie Reid, tucked the penalty into the corner. Suddenly, on their big debut in front of a crowd of more than 38,000, London City began to dream a little bigger.

The only issue was that Arsenal also made a significant purchase this summer. With half an hour gone, Olivia Smith, the club's new £1m signing from Liverpool, and Chloe Kelly swapped wings. Drifting off the left into a central position, Smith collected Steph Catley's pass, swerved around María Pérez, and unleashed a thunderbolt from outside the box.

Starting the season without the England captain Leah Williamson, who walked out on to the field wearing a knee brace to present the Champions League trophy to the crowd before kick-off, the target for Arsenal this season is obvious enough having finished 12 points adrift last season: catch Chelsea.

Arsenal pose such a threat going forward with Kelly and Smith cutting in off their wings and Alessia Russo leading the line. The England striker – fresh from signing a new contract – set up Kelly for Arsenal's second right before half-time. Introduce Mead and Stina Blackstenius off the bench and tiring defences will struggle.

Elene Lete made a string of impressive saves in the second half as Arsenal piled on the pressure and was eventually beaten when Mead set up goals in a couple of minutes for Blackstenius and Frida Maanum. Their only moment of concern was Kelly's challenge from behind on Parris, which received a yellow card.

Reeling in rivals Chelsea after they finished last season unbeaten is a steep challenge, and Arsenal will need to be close to perfect to win a first league title since 2019. After a mild early scare, they passed this first test.

For Kang, Prêcheur and this ambitious London City club, starting your inaugural WSL campaign at the champions of Europe was always a daunting prospect. "They will cause some problems in the league," said the Arsenal manager, Renée Slegers. By the time they return here next season, the gap may have closed.

Saturday's other results & tables

Sky Bet League One

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Gd	Pts
Cardiff	6	5	1	0	11	1	10	16
Doncaster	7	5	1	1	9	5	4	16
Huddersfield	7	5	0	2	14	8	6	15
Stevenage	6	5	0	1	9	4	5	15
Bradford	7	4	2	1	11	9	2	14
Barnsley	6	4	1	1	11	7	4	13
Luton	6	4	0	2	8	3	5	12
Lincoln City	7	3	3	1	10	8	2	12
Stockport Cty	7	3	2	2	12	11	1	11
Bolton	7	2	4	1	9	6	3	10
Mansfield	7	3	1	3	11	9	2	10
Leyton Orient	7	3	1	3	9	12	-3	10
Exeter	7	3	0	4	9	7	2	9
Wigan	7	2	3	2	10	9	1	9
AFC Wimbledon	7	3	0	4	8	9	-1	9
Northampton	6	2	1	3	4	6	-2	7
Rotherham	6	2	1	3	5	8	-3	7
Plymouth	7	2	0	5	8	15	-7	6
Wycombe	7	1	2	4	7	9	-2	5
Reading	6	1	2	3	5	9	-4	5
Burton Albion	5	1	1	3	5	9	-4	4
Blackpool	6	1	1	4	7	13	-6	4
Port Vale	7	0	2	5	4	9	-5	2
Peterborough	7	0	1	6	4	14	-10	1

Bolton (1)	3	AFC Wimbledon (0)	0
Doncaster (3)	3	Bradford (1)	1
Huddersfield (0)	3	Peterborough (0)	2
Lincoln City (2)	2	Wigan (1)	2
Plymouth (2)	4	Stockport County (1)	2
Port Vale (1)	2	Leyton Orient (2)	3
Rotherham (1)	1	Exeter (0)	0
Wycombe (1)	2	Mansfield (0)	0

Sky Bet League Two

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Gd	Pts
Gillingham	7	4	4	0	11	5	6	15
Swindon	7	5	0	2	14	9	5	15
Walsall	7	5	0	2	7	4	3	15
Grimsby	7	4	2	1	13	8	5	14
Bromley	7	3	4	0	12	7	5	13
Crewe	7	4	1	2	11	7	4	13
Chesterfield	7	4	1	2	11	9	2	13
Salford City	7	4	1	2	10	8	2	13
MK Dons	7	3	2	2	12	6	6	11
Notts County	7	3	2	2	12	9	3	11
Fleetwood Town	7	3	2	2	9	9	0	11
Cambridge Utd	7	3	1	3	8	7	1	10
Bristol Rovers	7	3	1	3	7	8	-1	10
Tranmere	6	2	2	2	10	7	3	8
Harrogate Town	7	2	2	3	7	9	-2	8
Colchester	7	1	4	2	7	8	-1	7
Oldham	7	1	4	2	4	5	-1	7
Barnet	7	2	1	4	6	10	-4	7
Barrow	7	2	0	5	5	9	-4	6
Crawley Town	7	1	2	4	5	11	-6	5
Shrewsbury	7	1	2	4	5	13	-8	5
Newport County	7	1	1	5	7	12	-5	4
Cheltenham	7	1	1	5	3	12	-9	4
Accrington	6	0	3	3	3	7	-4	3

Barnet (1)	1	Shrewsbury (3)	3
Barrow (0)	1	Swindon (2)	3
Bromley (2)	2	Gillingham (0)	2
Cambridge Utd (0)	0	Oldham (1)	1
Cheltenham (1)	1	Accrington Stanley (0)	0
Colchester (0)	1	Crewe (1)	1
Harrogate Town (0)	0	Crawley Town (1)	1
MK Dons (0)	2	Grimsby (3)	3
Newport County (0)	2	Bristol Rovers (0)	3
Notts County (0)	1	Fleetwood Town (0)	0
Salford City (0)	3	Tranmere (0)	1
Walsall (1)	1	Chesterfield (0)	0

Relegation play-off coming to the WSL

Andrew Butler

This Women's Super League season will be its last as a 12-team league. From next season, the league will increase to 14 teams, the fourth time in 11 years the league has expanded its number.

The 2015 WSL season contained just eight clubs, but such is the growth of the game that the top tier's 2026-27 season will begin with 75% more teams than a little over a decade ago.

Organisationally, the leap from 12 to 14 teams is no mean feat. "We had 40 formal meetings about it," said WSL's head of business management, Georgie Acons. "And then we had informal meetings, meeting face-to-face with every club over a three-week period, so it was pretty thorough and extensive."

The rationale for expansion is a commercial and competitive play. Two additional teams in the WSL will increase the total number of games from 132 to 182, with a five-year TV partnership deal already signed with Sky Sports and BBC Sport.

It is hoped the move won't benefit just the top tier, but give encouragement to those in WSL2 that promotion is a goal worth chasing.

"We felt like there was some risk of stagnation in WSL2," said Women's Super League COO Holly Murdoch.

"There was a lack of movement in that tier in particular. You could argue that if there is a lack of movement, what's the incentive to invest? With only one going up we have seen, historically, some of the same teams coming up and down, which is something that we want to protect against."

Winner takes all: London City Lionesses' game at Birmingham last season was in effect a play-off to decide who was promoted. Matt Lewis/The FA/Getty

To increase the number of teams to 14, the 2025-26 WSL2 season will promote two teams, while the bottom WSL team will play in a promotion/relegation play-off against the third-placed WSL2 side. It will be the first time since 1988 that English professional football will have a promotion/relegation play-off game to decide who plays in the higher tier the following season.

While commonplace in the German Bundesliga and Scottish Premiership, the prospect of a one-off "winner takes all" scenario presents a mouth-watering situation for the league.

"We're all really excited about it," said Murdoch. "There's a uniqueness to it. Football can be a cluttered environment, so having something that is distinctive and different for the women's game feels quite special to us, something that we really want to deliver on." Helpfully, there was something of a preview version of the match in last season's WSL2, when first-placed London City Lionesses played second-placed Birmingham Women in the final match of the campaign, with Birmingham needing to beat the Lionesses to gain promotion to the WSL.

The game ended 2-2 after a spirited fightback from Birmingham, but the much-hyped affair saw 8,749 fans attend, which was more than four times the average attendance at Birmingham's other home matches in the season.

The odds are still stacked in the favour of the WSL side when it comes to a promotion/relegation play-off – only two of the past 10 equivalent matches in the Bundesliga and Scottish Premiership have gone the way of the team in the lower tier.

An additional 50 matches presents a challenge to an already stretched women's game that includes a three-week winter break, a new Uefa club competition and a change to Fifa's international match calendar.

Given the rise from eight teams to 14 in the space of 11 years, a 14-team league is likely to remain until 2030, when a new women's calendar is currently slated to be implemented.

"The calendar is a real constraint. So actually, any more than 14 teams make it impossible at the moment, with the way the calendar is structured," said Murdoch.

"The calendar is probably the thing that we spent most time on," added Heather Cowan, the WSL's head of football operations.

"While there's loads of different things to consider with each format option, one of the things that we don't have absolute control over is that calendar.

"So we lost a significant proportion of those competition format options once we started to try to plot them in the calendar."

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Low quality: Andorra defender Christian García heads past his own goalkeeper to give England the lead in their World Cup qualifier at Villa Park. Michael Regan/The FA/Getty Images

Another insipid, pointless win leaves Tuchel searching for a proper test

England manager's dilemma is how to build a World Cup winning side while playing such poor teams

2-0

England
García (25 og)
Rice (67)

Andorra

Venue: Villa Park. Attendance: 39,000

George Simms
Villa Park

Thomas Tuchel was given 18 months to construct a World Cup-winning behemoth. Five games and eight months later, he has been tasked with vanquishing Albania, Latvia, Andorra (twice) and Senegal.

None of those matches has allowed him even a semblance of opportunity to learn anything useful, to do anything other than the bare minimum of his job description, to squat on the touchline looking pensive. The art of games like these is to concoct meaning from something utterly meaningless, to declare debutant Elliot Anderson the next Bryan Robson or fuel the infernal Trent Alexander-Arnold/Reece James debate. But really this, as much of Tuchel's tenure has been, was just deckchairs on the Titanic, busy work, football for football's sake, sporting brainrot.

The Andorran Primera Divisó, in which 11 of the national squad play, does not begin for another week. Starting No9 Ricard "Cucu" Fernández plays for Tabor Sezana in the Slovenian second tier, midfielder Pau Babot the German fifth tier. If more than five of Andorra's 81,000 populace travelled to Villa Park, they kept to themselves. The only palpable tension was whether fans had just brought their St George's crosses for the game, or whether they found a spare in their jean pocket from night-time escapades earlier in the week.

It would almost certainly suit everyone involved far better if England divided most international breaks into two distinct camps. On one side, a squad of 30-35 players who spend two weeks together, playing at least two full-pace, competitive intra-squad matches. You could even sell tickets for them – fans might not leave after 70 minutes out of overwhelming boredom.

On the other, a collection of Under-21s and fringe players to deal with Andorra and Latvia, for coaches to more closely assess while affording them experience and opportunities. Could Harvey Barnes, Lewis Cook and Ethan Nwaneri not have won this match, and probably have done a more entertaining job? Would they not have beaten Latvia or Albania, or give Serbia a good game on Tuesday?

There would be plenty of talk of disrespect, but when a system is a joke, laugh at it. However they achieve it, England need to find a way of making the deeply flawed international schedule work for them. World Cup qualification is a necessary process, but it doesn't have to be like this.

The consensus is that games like these are useful practice for dismantling "low blocks", English football's new white whale. And, to be fair, there were points of this game in which England attempted to break down Andorra like a drunk trying to break into his own house. Christian García's opening own goal, a miserably amateur defensive header past his own goalkeeper, was the equivalent of smashing a window with your own keys.

Yet surely it would be more helpful attempting to unpick a low block of similarly skilled players? There's a fair argument that English and Andorran internationals play, if not a wholly separate sport, then largely different ones. The necessary skills to win a match like this comfortably are superfluous to Premier League players, like astronauts being asked to operate a Ford Fiesta. Four wheels won't get you far in space.

As expected, England appeared slightly more motivated and inspired than they had in the dreadful reverse match, a 1-0 victory in the sweltering Barcelona humidity, at the end of an exhausting season. After a report in Spain suggested Barcelona were already considering returning Marcus Rashford to sender, he repeatedly received the ball in space and either passed it backwards or ran head first into traffic, a fundamental flaw in his hardwiring.

But had he scored five, would it have really suggested anything other than he would thrive in the National League South? Perhaps Tuchel will not really be able to learn anything meaningful until he touches down in North America next summer.

ON OTHER PAGES

Is England captain Harry Kane all he is cracked up to be? **News, page 13**

Always the target: Spurs supporters did not stop in their criticism of Daniel Levy, even though he built the club's finances, the new stadium and training ground. Getty Images

Spurs can dream of titles now only because of Levy

Rory Smith

José Mourinho has never really been the sort to allow time to heal a wound. By the time Tottenham Hotspur lifted the Europa League in May, a little more than four years had elapsed since his acrimonious departure from the club. He might have been expected to have mellowed, just a little, perhaps even to have allowed whatever resentment he once felt at his dismissal to have ripened into fondness.

But Mourinho has never yet encountered a bruise he is unwilling to punch. Mischief always trumps magnanimity. "Tottenham plays [in the] Champions League," he said, when asked for a message of congratulation for his former employers. "And of course for Mr Levy, the millions that the Champions League gives, for him, is the best news."

In many ways, it's a classic Mourinho line: cutting, comprehensive, a knuckle-duster barely disguised by a velvet glove. It captures, in perfect clarity, exactly how football has seen Levy over the quarter of a century that he ran Tottenham. It casts him as an avatar for some combination of parsimony and avarice. It blurs the line between the institution and the individual. And, most of all, it indicates quite how large Levy has come to loom in our collective imagination.

It would not be quite accurate to describe Tottenham's now former executive chair as the Premier League's first celebrity executive. David Dein, his analogue on the other side of north London, was a prominent figure in the 1990s with Arsenal, some time before Levy took the reins at White Hart Lane. Manchester United fans had strong views on their club chair Martin Edwards throughout the 1980s; Anfield generally thought well of Liverpool chief executive Peter Robinson.

That Levy has had a comparable profile for the last two decades – that his face has become as familiar to many fans as those of the 13 permanent managers he hired and/or fired during his tenure – can be largely attributed to the character traits which Mourinho emphasised so deliberately.

In the popular imagination, the 63-year-old was the hard-nosed, tight-fisted pinchpenny, the man whose approach to negotiating was so painful that Alex Ferguson once compared it unfavourably with a hip replacement.

It was an image that gained traction in the four years Levy worked with Harry Redknapp, a manager seen basically as his antithesis. They were projected almost as a comic duo: the wheeler dealer and the miser, the spendthrift and the skinflint. Even Redknapp acknowledged that they made for an "odd couple", although he did not think that was especially unusual. "Anyone working with Daniel would be an odd couple," he once said.

That he should have crossed paths with Redknapp at precisely the point when the game's obsession not just with transfers but with the powerbrokers who conducted them was becoming all-consuming meant it was their relationship that came to define him in public perception.

That Levy oversaw a transformation at Tottenham is both widely understood and strangely overlooked. As Ian Graham, the pioneering analytics guru who would win fame for his work at Liverpool but who started in football as an external consultant for Spurs, points out in How To Win The Premier League, Tottenham were a "mid-table Premier League team, averaging 51 points per season" between 1992 and 2008. Levy's "financial acumen and running of the club", he writes, helped them shed that image.

In the 17 seasons since, Spurs have missed out on Europe competition just twice. They are, and they see themselves as, a Champions League club. They have made the finals of both of Europe's major club competitions. They have one of the most sophisticated and well-regarded training facilities in world football; they have a stadium seen as the best in the Premier League.

And they have done it all while retaining tight control of their finances; Deloitte, in its most recent report into the economics of the Premier League, found that Spurs spend just 42% of their income on wages. Levy is not popular with his peers; plenty complain that trying to do business with Spurs is too exhausting to be worthwhile. Other Premier League executives, though, have always been staggered by the amount of vitriol heaped upon him. Spurs, after all, may well be the best-run club in England.

That there were protests against Levy's role even as Spurs made their way to the Europa League final against Manchester United last season suggests that none of that concerns fans quite so much as his apparent unwillingness to loosen the purse-strings.

His determination to "drive a hard bargain at the best of times", as Redknapp wrote in his autobiography, Always Managing, has not been seen as a positive, proof of cool, rational stewardship. Football is an industry that values the cavalier more than the cautious. Levy's prudence has been cast instead as a lack of ambition, even greed.

There is some truth to that. As Antonio Conte once said, amid the ruins of his own time at Tottenham: "20 years there is the owner, and they never won something. But why?"

Levy's approach has come at a cost: they have missed out on players because some see Tottenham as a dead end, not a through road; Levy's insistence on waiting until the last minute to strike a deal has always made more business sense than sporting; failing to bolster Mauricio Pochettino's resources after they lost the Champions League final to Liverpool in 2019 counts as a colossal missed opportunity.

Judging by the statement published on behalf of the Lewis family in response to his departure on Thursday night, the club have adopted that version of history. "They want what the fans want: more wins, more often," as a source close to Tottenham's controlling owners said. Nobody thought to mention that such a sentiment is only possible because of all that Levy, popular or not, has done.

Daniel Levy timeline

2001

Appointed as club chair
A lifelong fan, he takes charge at just 39, warning there must be a balance between shareholders "who want profit" and fans "who want success". "Sometimes," he said, "the two do not go together."

2008

Tottenham win League Cup
The first trophy, won by Juande Ramos, the fourth permanent manager Levy had appointed.

2010

Spurs make Champions League
Under Harry Redknapp, Spurs finish fourth and qualify for Europe's elite for the first time.

2015-16

New stadium, title miss
Construction on new stadium begins. The next season Spurs push for the title until a late collapse sees Leicester win.

2019

Champions League final
In April, the first game in their new £1bn stadium. Two months later, they lose the Champions League final 2-0 to Liverpool.

2021

Another trophy chance wasted
José Mourinho sacked a week before League Cup final. Spurs lose and go on to finish seventh.

2024-25

Europa League glory
Sink to 17th in league under Ange Postecoglou but season is saved by beating United in Europe.

2025

Levy out after almost 25 years
Said to be "heartbroken" at being eased out as owners insist they want "more wins, more often".

‘You just don’t feel like a person any more’

Goalkeeper Connor Roberts candidly reveals his own battles with depression after his father tragically took his own life, writes Sam Dalling

Finding his way back: Connor Roberts followed the playing path of his goalkeeper father, who turned out for Stoke in the 80s (below, fifth from left in back row) *Richard Saker/The Observer*

Connor Roberts vividly recalls sitting in his house on 2 June 2023 when his phone lit up. His mum was calling. “Unfortunately, she rang to say she thought my dad had tried to take his own life,” said Roberts. He rushed to his parents’ house, while a neighbour and close family friend, Steven, found Stuart in the shed.

“The police were already there, and Steven wouldn’t let me go in,” says Roberts, his voice slowing. “I just wanted to see if dad was OK, but I’m grateful Stephen stopped me going in.”

Roberts’ dad was 56 and had no history of depression until six weeks earlier. The last time that Roberts saw his father had been in Shrewsbury Hospital a short while before his passing.

“His mood had completely changed,” said Roberts, a goalkeeper who had spells at Everton, Fulham and Cheltenham. “There was a lot of sitting around, a lot of not living in the present, and not being present, if that makes sense.

“Unfortunately, he went about things the wrong way when it comes to depression. I also understand why he had been struggling. It makes you feel all those hurtful emotions, you lose confidence and there is anxiety. You just don’t feel like a person any more.”

Roberts felt “pure numbness” and “just wanted to be there” for his mum. “She’s very religious and an absolute saint,” he said. “My focus was making sure she was OK, and so I probably detached from myself too much. But I’m glad I did that.”

Roberts’ dad had become Stoke City’s youngest ever goalkeeper, but his career did not quite hit the heights, playing three times for the Potters in the 1984-85 season. Instead, he threw his energy into his son’s development.

“We spent many a day behind Stans Superstore [in Oswestry] and at my old school,” Roberts said. “When you’re not sharing the goal with six other keepers, you get lots of contact time and repetition. He knew what he was talking about and could serve a proper ball. He gave an awful lot to me in terms of advice and time. I miss those days.”

Stuart was “extremely tough” on Roberts and once left him behind in Chirk – a small town south of Wrexham – after a poor performance when he was 11, leaving Roberts to get a lift home with his coach. “But I wouldn’t change it for the world,” said Roberts. “You get parents who just tell their children they’re brilliant, but I knew that when I got praise, it was true. Hearing his praise was extra special.”

Roberts was then a Wales youth prospect and joined Tranmere Rovers where he was mentored by John Achterberg, former Tranmere goalkeeper. Next, he moved to Everton, training regularly with Tim Howard and Marcus Hahnemann.

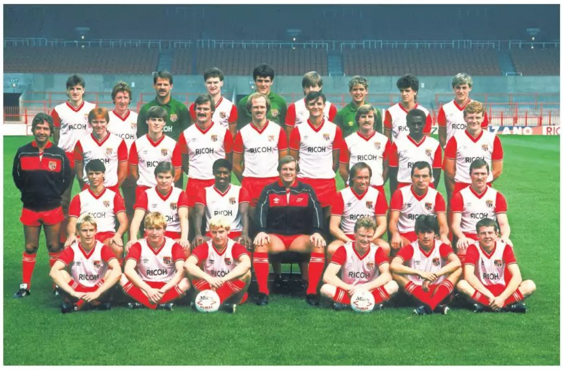
“With elite keepers, it’s like, ‘Wow, do you actually know where I’m going here?’ But they’re not guessing, they’re just so agile, so athletic.”

> **‘I couldn’t hold back the emotion. I just wish dad had seen me playing on that stage’**
>
> **Connor Roberts**

After a spell at Cheltenham Town, Roberts, who is now 32, returned home in 2015, playing in the Welsh Premier League for Bangor City, Aberystwyth Town, The New Saints, and, currently, Caernarfon Town.

He enjoyed most success at TNS, with the full-time club claiming a Welsh title “three-peat” while he was No 1 between 2022 and 2025. Having flirted with European qualification for two decades, they also made it into last season’s Europa Conference League group stages. For Roberts, those six games, including trips to Panathinaikos and Fiorentina, were equal parts blessing and curse.

“I couldn’t really hold the emotion back,” he tells *The Observer*. “I just wish that dad had seen me playing on that stage. It really, really hurt. I cried to the manager in four of the games. I was absolutely emotionally knackered. When all the WhatsApp messages were coming in afterwards, and I didn’t get the one that said, ‘How did it go, pal?’ – that’s what dad always said, those exact words – those were the games I wanted to tell him about.”



The intensity and all-consuming nature of playing professionally became a burden and Roberts lost himself. He felt “mentally fatigued” and admits that there were times when depression had him contemplating suicide.

“That thought repeated in the brain, and then the panic attacks started,” he said. “Depression is an absolutely disgusting disease, if we can call it that. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.”

Last December, things almost turned to tragedy. “I sat there with my two-year-old boy and said, ‘Please be a good boy for mummy because daddy’s going to go soon.’ Something came across me and I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

Fortunately, Roberts was lucid enough to drive to his mum’s house. “I said, ‘Listen, I’m in a bit of trouble here.’ An hour later, after I’d calmed down and stopped panicking, I realised that that was another win, right?”

Roberts knows that he is “nowhere near over” his struggles. For every good day, there will be one where he is “sat there and the next thing I am thinking about is, ‘Oh, Connor let’s hope we don’t fall back into that.’ Not a day passes where I haven’t thought about it 20 times”.

By speaking out now, he hopes to help even just one person “grab someone and make sure they’re in a safe environment”.

Having intended to retire at the end of last season, Roberts has since returned to play part-time with Caernarfon. That was a move motivated by a call from an unknown number when he was sat in a tattoo parlour in May.

“It was [Wales manager] Craig Bellamy,” said Roberts. “He said: ‘We’d love to have you meet up with the Wales squad.’”

And so Roberts spent a week in Alicante, primarily as a player, but with Bellamy also helping prepare Roberts as a coach. “Ahead of all the team meetings he gave me that bit of extra detail as to why he was presenting in a certain way and what the principles were,” he said.

Roberts is now throwing his energy into coaching. He began in primary schools but has since earned his Uefa A Licence (general and goalkeeping). He remains TNS’ head of goalkeeping and teaches on the FAW’s A and B licence courses. His students include Wayne Hennessey, the former Wales goalkeeper, and former Republic of Ireland goalkeeper Keiren Westwood, while he is currently in Japan on his first residential course with the Wales under-18 squad.

“My full focus is on reaching the elite coaching levels,” Roberts said with a grin. Stuart would be proud.

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From the touchline to the tryline: Brighton's Breach hasn't lost yet

Prolific wing scores again as England overcome early resistance to pass Australia, writes *Paul Hayward* in Brighton

47 - 7

England **Australia**

Venue: Brighton & Hove Albion Attendance: 30,433

The path to 50 England caps started for Jess Breach when she ran the line for her dad's games in another part of Sussex. Men would yell at her if they thought she had made a bad call. Others would defend her: "You can't shout at the girl – she's only 10!"

Breach, 27, recalled those days on a visit to Brighton's Amex Stadium in June to accompany the World Cup trophy. She didn't make contact with it. "You have to wear gloves to touch it," she said. But you could tell the glint of it stayed in her eye. She was back on the same turf for her 50th appearance – and 50th win – in England colours.

You read that correctly. Breach has never lost a game as an England player. Her half-century of victories came in this win over Australia, who are usually mortal rivals for English teams – but not in women's rugby. Eight times the countries have met and eight times England have been triumphant. This latest win was England's record-equalling 30th in a row and propelled the tournament favourites into a quarter-final against Scotland in Bristol next Sunday, the "right" half of the draw avoiding New Zealand and Canada.

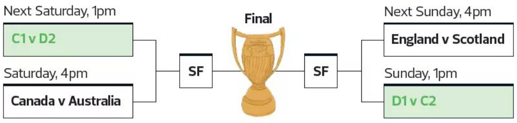
Route to the final as it stands

Pool A		Pts
1	**England**	**15**
2	**Australia**	**8**
3	USA	8
4	Samoa	0

Pool B		Pts
1	**Canada**	**15**
2	**Scotland**	**10**
3	Fiji	5
4	Wales	2

Pool C		Pts
1	**N Zealand**	**10**
2	**Ireland**	**10**
3	Spain	1
4	Japan	0

Pool D		Pts
1	**S Africa**	**10**
2	**France**	**9**
3	Italy	2
4	Brazil	0



Never mind the caps, though. Count the tries. At 20, Breach scored six on her England debut, against Canada, and another five in her second match. Last week in the 92-3 win over Samoa, she reached 52 tries in 49 matches. And it took her seven minutes 23 seconds to post her 53rd, after Australia had scored first – near the patch of turf where Japan sensationally overturned South Africa here in the 2015 men's World Cup. Was the curse of the Brave Blossoms striking England down on their own coast?

Duly provoked, Breach glided up to the other end of the field and touched down from an overlap. It hardly seems possible that England's first-choice No 11 was defending her right to wear the jersey into the knockout phase, against competition from Claudia Moloney-Macdonald, whose defensive skills are considered by many to be more solid.

Such are the challenges when England could probably field two sides in this competition, with the B team also likely to go deep.

There was some hope for the others, though, in Australia's unsettling of England in the first half an hour with deep kicks and impressive physicality.

Down for the fight: Sarah Bern scored England's seventh try after an initial unsettling from Australia. Mike Hewitt/Getty

Through all the ages of sport, dominant teams have been thrown off balance by the opposition doing what the dominant team likes least: by them refusing, in other words, to play the role they have been given.

Australia had no intention of helping the Red Rose pageant on its way, and were defending their own right to progress to the quarter-finals. But the drain on their energy from disrupting the England winning machine began to tell. England's superior rhythm and fitness demonstrated their fundamental advantage in women's rugby: their progression to full professionalism three years before everyone else.

In John Mitchell's talent-stacked squad, Breach was the archetype of the local hero. Only Ellie Kildunne, who left the field on 45 minutes after a bang to the head, received a noisier welcome from the crowd of 30,433. Breach is a multi-gifted all-round athlete who chose rugby over sprint hurdling, netball, hockey and county level gymnastics. She excelled in each – especially track and field, where she reached English national schools standard.

Her first taste of playing rugby was four years before she ran the gauntlet as a lineswoman – or lineschild – at Chichester Rugby Club. Her next move was to Brighton Rugby Club at 12 and then to Pulborough, where she won the national title.

"I'm a fast, agile winger, who can read the game quite well," she said on that ceremonial visit in June." She has also played full-back with her club Saracens to help her see "better pictures from the back". She didn't want, she says, to be seen as a pure speed merchant.

"Jess has a unique way of playing the game – she only needs a small amount of space and she'll burn you," says Mitchell. "What you don't see is how much she brings people together within the group."

Her fellow back-three superstar, Kildunne, went off for a head injury assessment and didn't return: a bigger cause for concern than the 30 minutes of turbulence Australia caused England before normal service resumed. Those concerns were confirmed as Kildunne has been ruled out for 12 days under the HIA protocols, meaning she will miss the Red Roses's quarter-final.

When they find their flow, England overwhelm with a swarming purpose. They radiate the coolness of a side simplifying a task which, in lesser hands, can look jerky and complex.

As the scoreboard rattled up, Breach prowled out while on a touchline, which she first patrolled as a 10-year-old with a flag.
Fifty caps, 50 wins, 53 tries.
Outlandish numbers.

Now it is 50 caps for Breach, 50 wins and 53 tries. They are outlandish numbers

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Smart mouthguard data to be used to prevent players from getting high number of head impacts

Jessica Hayden
Assistant sports editor

World Rugby will use data from smart mouthguards worn in the elite men's and women's game to tell coaches how many head impacts a player can sustain before they are advised not to play.

There is an increasing body of research to suggest that a high number of head impacts can correlate with neurodegenerative diseases later in life, with or without the presence of concussion or other similar brain injuries.

World Rugby says that the new guidelines will not mandate whether players can play, but will be used to advise coaches and unions about who should play.

The mouthguards, which have been introduced in the men's and women's elite game over the last four years, are worn by about 8,000 players internationally. They provide team doctors and medical staff with immediate information about the number of head impacts a player has received, as well as the velocity of the impact.

The mouthguards have the technology to measure the change in a player's velocity as well as their rotational force, which are used to determine the severity of the impact. They are worn by players at the international and club level and the data is held centrally by World Rugby, which allows the governing body to use the data better to understand head impacts and to update its policies.

Players at this year's Women's Rugby World Cup are wearing an updated design that also flashes to indicate to the referee when a player has sustained a higher-force impact. If a mouthguard flashes, the player is taken off for a 12-minute head injury assessment (HIA) and will take a series of tests to see if they are displaying any concussion symptoms.

Force for good: Smart mouthguards collect important data. Getty Images

World Rugby will use the data from all mouthguards to create guidelines for each position, similar to the player training load guidelines that are already in place.

"We see mouthguards playing most value in the long term," said Dr Lindsay Starling, the science and medical manager at World Rugby.

"Most of the current research is from NFL and football, which says there is a link between repeated head impacts and long-term brain health consequences, like developing into neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia. The mouthguards measure every head impact that occurs so we can quantify how many times they hit their head in a match, training session, and across the season. For long-term data, we can look at the number of concussions over a career, but these mouthguards allow us to quantify the head impacts too.

"What we do know, based on common sense, is that a high number isn't good. By quantifying collisions, we can help reduce the number. That's a huge part of it. We can set the range in each position, by month. We will develop the thresholds so players can be flagged as having had a percentage more head impacts in a week than what we accept as average. Then we suggest they reduce the player's load for the next week."

As the data develops, the criteria for an HIA are getting better. "From all the data over four years, we have a threshold for what is a very big impact," Dr Starling says. "We look at the 99th percentile, or the biggest 1% of head impacts. Should a player receive a head impact above that, we now have the ability to pick that up, and we think the doctors should see that."

The intervention comes at a critical time for rugby union. There are now 784 former rugby union players who have joined a lawsuit against World Rugby, England Rugby and the Welsh Rugby Union who argue that the sport's governing bodies failed to take reasonable action to prevent serious brain injuries.

Many of the players involved have been diagnosed with early onset dementia and probable chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a condition that can only properly be diagnosed posthumously.

'This means we can act now to protect players'

Dr Lindsay Starling
Science and medical manager, World Rugby

Concussions are just one part of the puzzle when it comes to head injuries. While they are so important to understand, what research from football and the NFL shows us is that the number of head impacts sustained over a career may have a correlation to developing neurodegenerative diseases like dementia later in life, even in the absence of concussion.

That's why it's so important that we understand how many head impacts a player has sustained. And that was actually a hard thing to measure, until we had smart mouthguards. Introduced about four years ago, the mouthguards are now worn by all elite men's and women's 15s and sevens players, and keep a track of the number and magnitude of head impacts players experience in matches and training. For long-term data, we have been able to say only how many concussions a player has had over their career, but now we can also see how many head impacts.

We want to get to a place where the data we capture can be used to help manage how many head acceleration exposures a player experiences within a week, a month, and across a season, with the aim of reducing unnecessary exposure that could affect their long-term brain health. Right now, we are in the phase of interpreting the information being captured and working with teams to build their understanding of what the numbers mean.

As this knowledge develops, we will be able to establish thresholds of exposure over different time frames, accompanied by clear recommendations and guidance on how players should be managed. At World Rugby, this means developing benchmarks that allow us to flag when a player has exceeded what we consider a typical number of head impacts in a given period. While we do not yet know exactly what those thresholds are, and they will differ by position and other factors, the ultimate goal is to use this information to guide teams in reducing player load.

These developments are really important. The mouthguards give us data that means we can follow current players until they retire and then into retirement and see what the effect is of their number of head impacts.

But we can't afford to wait for 50 years, or however long it would be, to get that data. Instead we want to act now. We know that a high number of head impacts is not good, so it's now about working out what the threshold is where we can say a player has received too many.

The brain is not like a muscle, it doesn't benefit or strengthen from repeated impacts. Even if we don't have the data or research to back up that repeated head impacts in rugby lead to worse brain health, we can act with good faith to take measures to protect our players.

No way through: Canada's Florence Symonds is tackled by Scotland's Rhona Lloyd and Emma Orr. Dan Mullan/Getty Images

Wales face big changes as Fiji seal famous win

Ben Coles

Mercifully, this gruelling Rugby World Cup for Wales is now over. Blown away by Scotland in their must-win opener, then thrashed 42-0 by Canada last weekend, Sean Lynn's side rounded out the pool stages by falling narrowly short in a comeback against Fiji, who secured their first win over a European side, 28-25.

This has been a sobering campaign for Wales, having promised so much more after Lynn's arrival as coach. Their final pool match in Exeter was a much-needed chance to restore some pride, and Carys Cox scored inside the opening two minutes to give Wales the perfect start.

What hurt Wales, having outscored Fiji five tries to four, was missed conversions – all five of them were squandered, with Keira Bevan having one effort charged down following Alex Callender's early score. Three tries in the space of 20 minutes saw Fiji pull clear into a 28-15 lead at half-time, including a double for the player of the match Josifini Neihamu, who also came up with a crucial steal late on. The offloading from Fiji's tight-five forwards building up to Neihamu's second score was outstanding. For Wales, the inquest now begins. "We had opportunities, we didn't take them," said Lynn. "One thing I will say is the character they showed from half-time to get themselves back in it was brilliant, but Test rugby is brutal and we just didn't take opportunities." What is clear is that changes are coming to the Wales set-up. "Individuals will be training a lot more centralised with us," said Lynn. Players spend most of their time with their Premiership Women's Rugby clubs which are all in England.

Ioan Cunningham, the Fiji coach, tasted revenge against his former side. Cunningham coached Wales from 2021 to 2024 and left the role after a summer of strife between the Welsh Rugby Union and its women's side. He admitted to being star-struck by seeing the Prince of Wales and Fiji sevens great Waisale Serevi in the stands. Serevi's daughter, Asinate, played for the Fijiana in the second row.

"This is huge, it's massive for Fiji Rugby and Fijiana," Cunningham said. "We set out on this journey to inspire young women and girls to play rugby back at home in Fiji, and I think the team have done that."

Samoa must have picked up more supporters during this tournament than any other side, after the impassioned answer their coach Ramsey Tomokino gave during his side's press conference last weekend about how much it meant to be part of it.

Listening to Tomokino, what truly mattered more than results was that his team, with their minimal resources (some of them mothers who had left their children on the other side of the world), had been given an opportunity to play in front of a crowd of more than 10,000 against the best side in the world.

Hair-raising: Ilona Maher helped the USA to a big win yesterday. Paul Ellis/AFP

England won 92-3 last Saturday and yet if you asked anyone at Franklin's Gardens which moments on the field led to the loudest cheers, they would probably mention two: the scrum penalty won by Samoa at the start of the second half, and fly-half Harmony Vatau's resulting successful penalty kick, scoring Samoa's first points at a Rugby World Cup since 2014.

Facing the USA proved a bridge too far, however, and they lost 60-0 in York, with the American flanker Freda Tafuna scoring four tries. "It's a learning curve for our players," Tomokino said. "We have enjoyed our time here. Our 24th player is England. We need opportunities for our team to be playing in competitions so that our players can be better."

Hope Rogers, arguably the USA's best player, also scored twice in a comprehensive win which gave them a slim chance of progressing to the quarter-finals if Australia were to capitulate to England in Brighton.

"We rise and fall as a team so we'll watch it together and for the first time ever, I think, cheer on the England team and hope for the best," said the USA coach Sione Fukofuka.

Canada remain one of England's main threats for the title and finished the pool stages with a perfect record following their 40-19 win over Scotland in Exeter. Despite the loss, Scotland wing Francesca McGhie continued her impressive scoring at the tournament, adding her sixth try.

Both sides had already booked their spots in the quarter-finals but finishing as the top seed mattered for Canada, ensuring they can avoid facing England until the final at Twickenham later this month.

"Definitely important to finish first in our pool to be in the best position possible. Whoever we face we'll be ready," said the Canada captain Alex Tessier, the Exeter centre playing in familiar surroundings at Sandy Park.

Canada's coach, Kévin Rouet, was pleased with how his side adapted against tougher opposition following routine wins over Fiji and Wales. "What I like is that even if one part of the game is not perfect, we can score tries in many ways. We still scored 40 points against tough opposition so I think we should be proud of that."

Attention more than wins is what the Cowboys crave

America's Team in spotlight for wrong reasons, says *Jessy Parker Humphreys* in New York

Back in the glory days: Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones in the 1990s, but he saw his team open this season with defeat this week (below) against the Eagles. *Stephen Dunn/ Getty Images*

Jerry Jones wants to be the main character. Watching even five minutes of documentary The Gambler and His Cowboys would make that clear to the uninitiated. The owner of the Dallas Cowboys sits behind his desk with the freedom to rehash his own mythology, with the result being released on Netflix ahead of the new NFL season. Based on the approach the Cowboys have taken in the past week, no one bought into that lore more than Jones himself.

For anyone without the desire to dive into yet another sports documentary, Jones bought a fading version of "America's Team" at the end of the 1980s. Having captured the hearts and minds of the country with Super Bowl wins in 1972 and 1978, they were reinvigorated under Jones's ownership, winning three titles in four seasons in 1993, 1994 and 1996.

It is undeniable that Jones revived a sleeping giant and created one of the all-time great sporting dynasties.

The way he talks about it, he also invented modern sport. His argument is persuasive. Whether it was prancing cheerleaders, celebrity onlookers or a squad so chaotic one player stabbed another in the neck with a pair of scissors, Jones was an early adopter of the concept that winning was good, but attention was even better. Doing both was a surefire way to hit the jackpot.

Given this, the decision by Jones to trade the Cowboys's best player, Micah Parsons, to the Green Bay Packers on the eve of the NFL season is entirely in keeping with who Jones is. No one will say that it makes sporting sense. In return the Cowboys got defensive tackle Kenny Clark and two first-round draft picks. But as performance art? As one pundit said ahead of the Cowboys' defeat in their first game against the Philadelphia Eagles this week, "it's been a pre-season all about the Cowboys".

It is important to note that it has been nearly 30 years since the Cowboys last won a Super Bowl. It is even more important to note that a lopsided deal where the Cowboys traded their star player for a raft of draft picks did kickstart their sprint to stardom. However, no one thinks they will achieve anything even remotely equivalent as a result of this trade.

In their opener against the Eagles, Jones's team were somewhat upstaged on the shock front when Eagles defensive tackle Jalen Carter was ejected after only six seconds for spitting on Cowboys's quarterback Dak Prescott. The positive news was that the Cowboys, playing their first game under new head coach Brian Schottenheimer, went toe to toe with the Super Bowl champions. There was a lengthy weather delay which disrupted the flow of the game – it is American sports after all – and when the sides reappeared, the Eagles did go on to win 24-20. It is hard to know who the result reflects worse on at this point of the season.

The Parsons trade has clearly made the Cowboys a less talented team, certainly for now and almost certainly in the future. The Green Bay Packers made him the best paid non-quarterback of all time to give a sense of the level he is at.

Every owner wants to win, but if that's not possible, being talked about is the second best

But Jones's logic has always been that sport could be soap opera. That headlines were as good as stat lines. What mattered was if people were paying attention.

It is a far cry from the clean-cut American look that was cultivated under head coach Tom Landry since the beginning of the franchise. George W. Bush's line at the start of the Netflix documentary summarises what people thought about the team: "The hole in Texas Stadium was so God could watch his favourite team. That would be the Cowboys."

Since then, the Cowboys have had everything from drug scandals to violence issues. A bad trade is the least of their worries.

But the essence of what Jones was getting at in the 1990s has become only more true. Sport is increasingly about the gossip and the drama and who can speak loudest. Politics is, too.

The Cowboys' lack of success over the past 30 years has made their original moniker drift away but it actually feels truer than ever. An ageing man, supremely confident on the basis of his past successes, deciding what he wants to do without consequence. It's certainly not unfamiliar to people in the United States.

It feels unlikely that the Cowboys's desperate trade does anything to help them reach the Super Bowl. The question to ask is whether that was what they wanted it to do. There is no doubt that every franchise owner wants to win. But if that's not possible, being talked about is second best. That is a concept that many people across the world have taken to heart. Where could it be more fitting than at "America's Team"?

Other sports results

FOOTBALL

ENTERPRISE NATIONAL LEAGUE: Aldershot 2 Brackley 2, Altrincham 2 Sutton Utd 1, Boreham Wood 3 Morecambe 0, Boston Utd 1 Solihull Moors 2, Carlisle 3 Truro City 0, Forest Green 1 Hartlepool 0, Rochdale 2 Braintree Town 0, Scunthorpe A Wealdstone A, Southend 3 FC Halifax 0, Tamworth 1 Eastleigh 0, Woking 5 Gateshead 0, Yeovil 1 York 3.

North: Alfreton Town 1 King's Lynn Town 1, Bedford Town 2 Curzon Ashton 2, Buxton 2 Oxford City 1, Chester FC 1 Scarborough Athletic 1, Chorley 3 AFC Telford 1, Darlington 1 Hereford FC 1, Kidderminster 1 Macclesfield FC 1, Merthyr Town 2 Worksop Town 0, Peterborough Sports 0 AFC Fylde 5, Radcliffe 4 Marine 1, Southport 0 South Shields 0, Spennymoor Town 2 Leamington 0.

South: Chesham Utd 0 Bath City 0, Chippenham 1 Hampton & Richmond 1, Dag & Red 2 Worthing 5, Dorking Wanderers 2 AFC Totton 1, Eastbourne Borough 0 Hemel Hempstead 0, Ebbsfleet United 1 Hornchurch 1, Enfield Town 0 Weston-S-Mare 1, Farnborough 1 Dover 2, Maidenhead Utd 2 Chelmsford 1, Maidstone Utd 0 Horsham 3, Salisbury FC 1 Tonbridge Angels 3, Torquay 4 Slough 2.

WILLIAM HILL SCOTTISH—Ch'ship: Morton 0 Raith 1, Ross County 1 Arbroath 2.

RUGBY LEAGUE

BETFRED SUPER LEAGUE—Warrington 12 Leigh 34.

RUGBY UNION

WOMEN'S WORLD CUP POOL A— USA 60 Samoa 0. **POOL B**—Canada 40 Scotland 19, Wales 25 Fiji 28.

THE RUGBY CH'SHIP—Australia 28 Argentina 24, New Zealand 24 South Africa 17.

CRICKET

T20 BLAST - QUARTER FINAL—Lancashire v Kent (Old Trafford): Kent 153 (20.0 overs). Lancashire 156-7 (18.3 overs; L S Livingstone 85no). Lancashire won by 3 wickets.

Fixtures

Football 3.00 unless stated

TODAY

FIFA WORLD CUP EUROPEAN QUALIFYING - GROUP A
Germany v Northern Ireland (7.45), Luxembourg v Slovakia (7.45)
WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE
Brighton v Aston Villa (12.0), Liverpool v Everton (12.0), Man Utd v Leicester (12.0), Tottenham v West Ham (12.0)

CRICKET
Third One Day International: England v South Africa (The Rose Bowl, 11am).

FORMULA 1
Italian Grand Prix (Monza). (Race 2pm).

RUGBY LEAGUE
Betfred Super League: Hull K R v Hull (3.05).

RUGBY UNION
Women's World Cup Pool C: Japan v Spain (Midday), New Zealand v Ireland (2.45). **Pool D:** France v South Africa (4.45), Italy v Brazil (2.00)

Football 7.45 unless stated

TOMORROW

FIFA WORLD CUP EUROPEAN QUALIFYING - GROUP C
Belarus v Scotland, Greece v Denmark
EUROPEAN UNDER-21 CHAMPIONSHIP QUALIFYING - GROUP FOUR
Kazakhstan v England (4.00)
GROUP NINE
Wales v Denmark (7.30)

CRICKET
County Ch'ship - Division One: Essex v Durham (Chelmsford), Somerset v Yorkshire (Taunton), Surrey v Warwicks (The Kia Oval), Sussex v Hampshire (Hove), Worcs v Notts (New Road). **Division Two:** Kent v Lancashire (Canterbury), Leics v Gloucs (Leicester), Middlesex v Derbyshire (Lord's), Northants v Glamorgan (Northampton). (All Day 1, 11am).

TUESDAY

FIFA WORLD CUP EUROPEAN QUALIFYING - GROUP F
Armenia v Rep of Ireland (5.00), Hungary v Portugal
GROUP K
Albania v Latvia, Serbia v England
INTERNATIONAL MATCH
Wales v Canada
EUROPEAN UNDER-21 CHAMPIONSHIP QFYING - GROUP TWO
Scotland v Portugal (7.00).
GROUP FOUR
Rep of Ireland v Andorra (7.30).
GROUP SIX
Georgia v N Ireland (5.00).

THURSDAY

UEFA WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE - THIRD QUALIFYING ROUND FIRST LEG
Brann v Man Utd (5.00).

RUGBY LEAGUE
Betfred Super League: Leeds v Catalans Dragons (8.00).

FRIDAY

SKY BET CHAMPIONSHIP
Ipswich v Sheff Utd (8.00).
WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE
Man City v Brighton (7.30), West Ham v Arsenal (7.30).

CRICKET
Second Twenty20 International: England v South Africa (Old Trafford, 6.30pm)

RUGBY LEAGUE
Betfred Super League: Leigh v St Helens (8.00), Wigan v Castleford (8.00)

RUGBY UNION
Premiership Rugby Cup Pool A: Gloucester v Exeter (7.30). **Pool B:** Newcastle v Harlequins (7.45)

Despite Gibson’s legacy, tennis still has its faults

Seventy-five years after being the first black player in the US Open, has much changed?

By *Jessy Parker Humphreys* in New York

Changemaker: For all the strides Gibson took, there is still a way to go *Hulton-Deutsch Collection/ Getty Images*

On the east side of the Arthur Ashe stadium at Flushing Meadows stands a bust. Rising out of a stone block is the profile of Althea Gibson, the first black player to participate in the US National Championships, as it was before it became the US Open. She has been a prominent figure throughout this year’s tournament, with celebrations marking the 75th anniversary of her debut appearance.

The line from Gibson’s debut at the tournament to the success of black American tennis is obvious. Venus Williams spoke about Gibson before her own first-round match against Karolína Muchová, in which she wore a Gibson-inspired outfit.

“Althea accomplished so much and a lot of it has not been given the credit it deserves,” said Williams, who at 45 was competing in her 25th US Open. “That’s the most important part to me. Shining a light on it and acknowledging it.”

US Open semi-finalist Naomi Osaka began playing tennis after her father watched the Williams sisters win the 1999 French Open doubles final. The 2023 US Open champion Coco Gauff, who lost to Osaka in the fourth round this year, also had Serena Williams as her idol growing up. The successes of black women in tennis have undeniably inspired those who have come since.

Yet Gibson herself was a complex figure who did not always appreciate the role she was thrust into as the face of black integration in sport.

“I don’t consider myself to be a representative of my people,” Gibson reportedly once said when asked if what she had achieved in tennis helped the cause of black people more broadly.

“I tried to feel responsibilities to negroes,” she told TIME magazine in 1957, a few months after she had become the first black player to win Wimbledon. “But that was a burden on my shoulders. If I did this or that, would they like it? Perhaps it contributed to my troubles in tennis. Now I’m playing tennis to please me, not them.”

Born in South Carolina but raised in Harlem, New York, Gibson was encouraged to be sporty from an early age by her father. She was later invited to play at the Cosmopolitan Club, a black tennis club in Harlem, after being spotted playing tennis in the park.

That began a career that saw her become the French Open champion, the Wimbledon champion twice, and the US Open champion twice.

Yet Gibson struggled throughout her career to conform to the standards of femininity expected of her as the sole representative of blackness, and black womanhood within tennis.

A tomboy throughout her life, she disliked dressing or appearing in the feminine manner that people assumed she should, while she could also be a sore loser, refusing to shake hands with her opponent after a loss.

The constricted nature of being the “first”, and therefore being expected to uphold the ideals of that group as a whole, drained her.

Looking at the black tennis stars of today, there is much more freedom to express themselves in a way that they feel comfortable. Osaka’s custom outfits have been the talk of the tournament, even if Gibson herself would surely have cringed when Osaka revealed that her bedazzled Labubu toy for her fourth-round win over Gauff was called Althea Glitterson.

Even in tougher moments, like when Gauff broke down in tears after struggling with her serve in her second-round win over Donna Vekić, there is a freedom to show vulnerability.

Osaka, Gauff and Williams have also been the biggest stars of the tournament.

Williams’ run to the women’s doubles quarter-finals with Leylah Fernandez drew huge crowds, while Gauff and Osaka’s meeting in the fourth round was the most highly anticipated pre-semi-final match.

When it comes to the US Open in particular, black women are the biggest stars of the tournament.

But an incident between Jelena Ostapenko and Taylor Townsend demonstrated how those expectations have not simply evaporated through the success of black tennis players over the past 75 years. Following Townsend’s 7-5, 6-1 win in the second round over Ostapenko, the 28-year-old Latvian reportedly accused Townsend of having “no class” and “no education”.

Ostapenko believed that Townsend had been unsporting by not apologising after winning a point that had hit the net cord.

“It’s one of the worst things you can say to a black tennis player in a white majority sport,” said Osaka, when asked about it. “I don’t know if [Ostapenko] knows the history of it in America, but it was just terrible.”

While Ostapenko apologised on Instagram and Townsend said she did not believe her opponent was being racist, the altercation showed how insidious racial stereotyping can be.

Throughout her career, Gibson experienced that same accusation – that she did not know how to play the sport in the proper manner, with that propriety a stand-in for the unspoken notion of whiteness.

It can be complicated trying to balance honouring Gibson’s legacy with the knowledge that it was not something she herself was necessarily comfortable with.

At times during the tournament, as fans pose in front of the graphic of Gibson that is this year’s poster, it can feel like it has been flattened.

At others, it can feel like a genuine celebration and recognition of someone who changed tennis for ever.

Truly to do justice to Gibson, the takeaway should be that for all the unprecedented success black women have had at Flushing Meadows, and in tennis more broadly, the realities she faced still exist in the sport.

That is something that still needs to change.

She would have cringed at Naomi Osaka’s bedazzled Labubu toy called Althea Glitterson

Last men standing: Sinner and Alcaraz face each other today for a third consecutive grand slam final, a record in tennis's Open era. Tim Clayton/Getty Images

'Sincaraz' reign supreme again but are they good for tennis?

Jessy Parker Humphreys
New York

When they make the draw for a grand slam, they leave spaces for who will win each match. This year they could have written in the names of the men's finalists at the start. Only the most foolhardy would have bet against Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner being the last two left standing.

After all, this is the year of "Sincaraz". It may well be the next decade, too. There are simply no men who come close to the 22-year-old Alcaraz and 24-year-old Sinner. This will be their third consecutive grand slam final against each other in 2025, having already contested the French Open and Wimbledon this year. This has never happened in the Open era. It is the second year where one of the two has won every Slam available. It is hard to imagine that changing.

The clown and the robot. There is Alcaraz with his goofy grin and childlike energy. There is Sinner with his permafrown and gritted teeth.

They are perfect foils for each other. All rivalries need a goodie and a baddie. Everyone will have a different opinion on who is who. When it comes to sport those designations can be remarkably flexible. Just ask Novak Djokovic, who lapped up the praise from Arthur Ashe Stadium in his straight-sets semi-final loss to Alcaraz. The Spanish golden boy looked mildly perplexed at the sudden popularity of the older Serb.

Djokovic was supposed to be the guy who could upset the applecart. At this point in his career, the 38-year-old acts as a sort of ATP grenade. Sinner dealt with him in straight sets at Wimbledon and Roland Garros, like the son who realises he is actually now better than his father, but Alcaraz had lost to him in January's Australian Open and in the Olympic final last summer. He had little to worry about in New York though, beating the most successful tennis player of all time 6-4, 7-6 (4), 6-2.

Alcaraz and Sinner must be thinking less about overtaking Djokovic in the micro and more in the macro. The target is 24 grand slam titles. They might both have a shot at that total.

If Alcaraz wins today, he will become the second youngest man to earn six grand slams after Björn Borg. If he were to win every match in straight sets, he would become the first man to manage that at the US Open. That isn't a statistic open to Jannik Sinner after he dropped a set to Denis Shapovalov in the third round and then Félix Auger-Aliassime in the semi-final.

Sinner, who has four grand slam titles, is usually so methodical and laser-focused that he steamrollers opponents. "AI-generated" is how fourth-round opponent Alexander Bublik described him. That was before Sinner beat him 6-1, 6-1, 6-1 in only one hour and 21 minutes.

For Sinner, the question is how does one man hit the ball so hard but with such precision? To create overwhelming force on a tennis ball with the delicacy of threading a needle.

Alcaraz is supposed to be the maverick. It is he who can rip a forehand winner that takes the breath away before chaotically shanking a shot off his racket frame in the same game.

It is not that either of those descriptions has been untrue across this past fortnight. Sinner still looks like the more reliable player, despite having dropped two sets. Even that is a ridiculous statement to write. They have both set the bar impossibly high with their own brilliance.

The freshness Sinner has as a result of being forced to take time off due to a doping ban before the French Open has been heavily emphasised. It is not like either of them have ended up playing particularly long matches. But the excitement remains because of the unpredictability. No one who took even a cursory glance at the French Open final could call this one, because these men can do the impossible.

Their rivalry feels fresh, but as with all dynasties the repetition could start to grate

The fact that it is 1-1 between the two in slam finals this year makes this feel far closer to any kind of "finals" concept that the ATP could conceive. Even the way that Sinner was forced to retire in last month's Cincinnati final against Alcaraz means the resumption of their rivalry feels relatively fresh.

But the question that comes to all dynasties, and this is undoubtedly one, is: when does the repetitiveness start to grate? Even the "Big Three" of Djokovic, Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal became in some ways tiresome – and there were at least three of them, as well as Andy Murray thrown in for good measure.

Today's final will involve some spectacular tennis. There are bragging rights on the line, beyond winning the US Open. Whoever triumphs will also be world No1. But if the finalists' names can be written in at the draw, it is easy to wonder when the rivalry will move from being box office to bog standard.

Observer Sport online

Not so Super

Nigeria have so far struggled in their World Cup qualifying campaign, and the Super Eagles are staring down the barrel of being absent for a second successive World Cup, writes *Rory Smith*

Not so Spursy

What next for Spurs Women following Daniel Levy's dismissal? The team could finally be more than a footnote for the club in this supposed new era of success, writes *George Simms*

Premier Party

Premier League transfer window spending has topped £3 billion for the first time. As long as the money keeps flowing, there is no reason the party should ever end, writes *Rory Smith*

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Wish you weren't here: postcards from a cycling tour

George Simms gets on his bike to chase down a sport in crisis below the young talent reviving Tour of Britain

In a washed-out caravan in a B&M superstore car park in Stowmarket, six British cycling prodigies are preparing for the nation's biggest men's race. Ben Wiggins, former junior world champion and the mulleted scion of Bradley, has his feet on the dashboard. At 6ft 3in, the 22-year-old former individual pursuit world record-holder Josh Charlton has to duck through the door frame. Fans and shoppers weave around the glossy team buses as if perusing a car boot sale, unimpeded by any semblance of security.

In this walled corner, the Great British Cycling Team are British road cycling in microcosm – elite talent increasingly inexplicably enduring through ever-diminishing infrastructure and support. Apparently this is one of the more spacious municipal spaces being used as a race base across the men's Tour of Britain's six stages, starting in Suffolk before weaving through Buckinghamshire and Warwickshire, ending today in Cardiff.

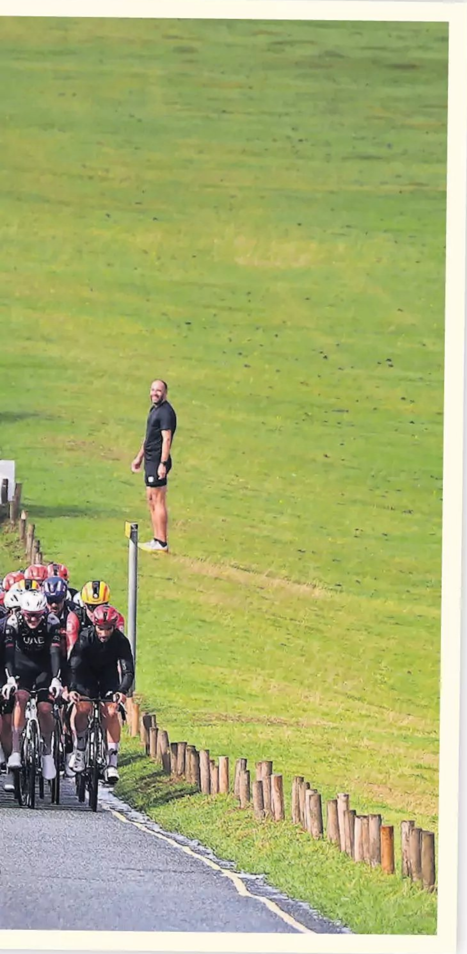
The start and end point of stage two, Stowmarket, is tucked between Bury St Edmunds and Ipswich. An archetypal high street rapidly frays at the edges, all charity shops and peeling paint, takeaways peddling e.coli and disappointment. The Star Convenience Store was recently shuttered "due to criminal activity on the premises". Its crime? Illegally selling vapes.

This week doubles as the Geraint Thomas Retirement Tour, the final race of the only Tour de France winner ever born on this flag-fetishing isle. In cycling's ever-glamorous tradition, even Thomas describes his accommodation before the first stage as "a right dump". The final stage will begin outside Newport's Geraint Thomas Velodrome. Mercifully, Welsh flags outnumber all others around Stowmarket, a sign of Thomas's everyman magnetism and relative stardom. With Chris Froome's career also in peril after a serious injury this week, British cycling could be entering a superstar vacuum.

But there has never been such depth and breadth of promise here, especially from the men: 24 of the 114 Tour of Britain starters are British, with another 11 competing in the Vuelta a España. Another 11 rode the Tour de France in July, equalling a record set last year, and four on the women's Tour. All are 24 or younger.

Oscar Onley, the elfin Scot, finished fourth on this year's Tour de France. Visma-Lease a Bike's Matthew Brennan, 20, has won an astonishing 12 races in his first year as a professional, including the third stage of the Tour of Britain. Joseph Blackmore, 22, won last year's Tour de l'Avenir – Tour of the Future – following the likes of Tadej Pogačar and Egan Bernal, while Noah Hobbs (21) and Elliot Rowe (19) both won stages in this year's event. Josh Tarling, 21, is among the world's finest time-triallists. Samuel Watson, 23, finished third in Stowmarket for Ineos. At 26, Olympic gold medallist Tom Pidcock is now challenging in the Vuelta. On the women's side, Pfeiffer Georgi (24) excels on the road, Emma Finucane (22) on the track. "It's difficult to say it's a golden generation because I can't remember it not being," Matt Brammeier, GB's director sportif, tells *The Observer*. Talent has never been the issue.

And yet everyone speaks of a sport in crisis, especially below the elite level. The Tour of Britain almost collapsed in 2024, bailed



Long road: Cycling has hit a painful low in funds and tours since Covid. Josh Wheeler/Alamy; Bradley Collyer/PA

out by sponsorship from Lloyd's, with the women's race now only four stages. The Tour de Yorkshire never returned post-pandemic. The RideLondon Classique men's and women's races were cancelled for 2025 at least. The Junior Tour of Wales, Britain's premier junior men's race, was axed in June, perhaps the most concerning of all the cuts given the precarious position of youth cycling more generally. The National Road Series had 10 open races in 2019, now down to seven. Welsh Cycling, rebranded as Beicio Cymru, has pivoted towards cycling tourism.

This makes road cycling something of an outlier in British sport, without world-leading competitions or infrastructure. England usually acts as an aircraft hangar for the world's sport, for its investment, but somehow little of that has reached cycling. As one British cycling employee puts it to me: "It's long been clear trickle-down economics just doesn't work in cycling." British Cycling's Elite Road Racing Task Force produced 16 "broad recommendations" to improve the state of the sport in January 2024, but most people you speak to say the issue begins and ends with "needing more money".

The vast finances of most World Tour teams help preserve the veneer of functionality by relieving the burden on British Cycling. While most riders were traditionally not signed until the under-23s, many now join development squads at 18, as was the case with Brennan and Onley. Wiggins and his Great Britain team-mate Josh Golliker, 21, are also both on World Tour development teams. For comparison, Thomas didn't join a World Tour team until he was 24, Froome 25.

Beyond that, as recently as 2019 there were six British UCI Continental teams – effectively cycling's third tier – but the final two folded earlier this year. For comparison, the Philippines have four, Iran and Rwanda three each. This forces those on the cusp of professionalism to look elsewhere, the two GB Tour of Britain debutants had to, both joining French club teams. Unless you join a World Tour development team, your options are increasingly limited.

"It is definitely a shame that there's not the clear pathway there was pre-Covid," Ben Wiggins said. "I wish it got more attention, but it's also the state of professional cycling. Just look around here [gestures at B&M]. It's a shame, the attitude towards cycling from some people in this country."

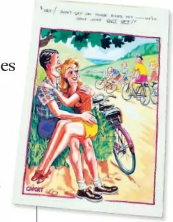
The Tour of Britain is still a prestigious and well-regarded race, showing tangible signs of recovery, even if it clashes with the more prestigious Vuelta. Remco Evenepoel, one of the sport's few true superstars, is here, while nine World Tour teams competing in 2025 is the most since 2019.

The perceived British cycling boom has long been pronounced dead, a heady pre-Brexit phase where there was no problem marginal gains could not solve. Between March 2023 and last December, British Cycling membership dropped nearly 11%, to 122,982, from a peak of 165,000 in July 2020. Cycling is now a Union Jack sport in a St George's Cross age, the last bastion of London 2012.

Anecdotally, the trigger for this freshly golden talent cycle was London 2012 and Bradley Wiggins's 2012 Tour win. Charlton said that "was the first time I really knew what I wanted to do with my life". Perhaps all cycling really needs to survive is a few superstars. Onley and Pidcock have both spoken about being inspired by watching Team Sky's domination on ITV. Shame the Tour de France isn't continuing its 40-year tenure on free-to-air TV.

The peak of the cycling boom was the 2014 Tour Grand Depart – 4.8m people watched the first three stages in person – and the Tour will return to Britain in 2027. The men's event begins in Edinburgh, with the women's event also beginning in the UK. Brennan has said "starting Stage 2 in the yellow jersey would be cool", an increasingly realistic aim. This could inspire the next golden generation. But what will be left to help them realise their potential?

Lycra love story: The return of the Tour's Grand Depart to the UK in 2027 may rally the heyday of 2014 crowds and memberships.



Golden generation: There's plenty of rising cycling talent, but their pathways have reduced. Bradley Collyer/PA

Verstappen shocks McLarens to take pole with fastest ever F1 lap

Matt Majendie
Monza

After the final race before the summer break, Max Verstappen predicted Red Bull would not win another race all season. In Monza yesterday, he reignited the possibility of victory with a qualifying lap he aptly described as "unbelievable".

It had echoes of the unlikely pole positions in Suzuka and Imola earlier in the season, in a car which appeared to lack a little pace through much of the three preceding practice sessions.

His time of 1min 18.792sec was a lap record for Monza, and the fastest lap in Formula One history, beating Lewis Hamilton's at Monza in 2020 for Mercedes by 0.095sec – at an average speed of 164.484mph. It eclipsed the lap set by Lando Norris just moments before, the difference between them just 0.077sec. It is the second successive weekend in which the Briton has broken the lap record in Q3 only then to be denied pole.

Red Bull have tinkered with Verstappen's car all weekend, making some final adjustments just before qualifying to good effect. And his three qualifying sessions proved nigh-on perfect, going at least three tenths of a second quicker in each.

He intimated there had been a fraught build-up to qualifying, at least for the team's technical director Pierre Waché, when he said over the race radio: "Relax Pierre, it's all good."

Verstappen said: "To be on pole here is fantastic. The car has been working a lot better all weekend. To be able to fight for pole… we made some final changes which allowed me to push a bit more."

While Verstappen raised eyebrows with his latest pole, Norris insisted it had come to be expected. "Max has been quick all weekend," he said. "It's never a surprise with Max. I feel like I didn't do the best of jobs. But P2 still isn't a bad position to be off the line. To get past Max, I'm sure is going to be a big challenge."

McLaren had gone into the weekend with the anticipation of continuing their current dominance but practice suggested the two Ferraris, Verstappen and even Mercedes might push them close in qualifying.

As it transpired, only Verstappen could when it mattered, with Oscar Piastri a spot behind his McLaren team-mate, a much-needed boost for Norris to win that head to head as he stares down a 34-point deficit in the drivers' championship standings.

And yet it is a second successive weekend in which Norris has been dominant in practice but unable to translate that into a pole position.

That said, it could have been worse for the nine-time grand prix winner, who was called back into the pits midway through Q2 with an issue and needed a tow from his team-mate down the straight to help him sneak into the final shootout in fifth.

McLaren have habitually had the superior race pace come race day and have generally been kinder on their tyres, but the lower degradation nature of this circuit suggests Verstappen could yet hold the chasing pair at bay.

Expectation is huge from the tifosi towards Ferrari duo Charles Leclerc and Hamilton. The latter began the session on the back foot knowing he had a five-place penalty coming when he finished. As a result, Hamilton will start today's race relegated to 10th, with his team-mate in fourth.

Elsewhere on the grid, Isack Hadjar went from hero to zero for Racing Bulls. A week after a first-ever podium, the 20-year-old Frenchman bowed out in the first qualifying session along with his New Zealand team-mate Liam Lawson.

Hadjar's possible rival for the Red Bull seat alongside Verstappen next season, 25-year-old Yuki Tsunoda, made it into Q3 and provided a tow for team-mate Verstappen in his quest for pole. Tsunoda starts today's race in ninth, bumped up one place by Hamilton's demotion.

Penalty pace: Lewis Hamilton says he'll "wiggle through" the rest of the field after his relegation to 10th place on today's grid. Philippe Lopez/AFP

Flat out: Harry Brook has to switch between Tests and all sorts of short-form cricket over the season. *Adam Davy/PA*

Brook's dilemma as England search for more meaning

Ben Bloom

At its core – to a backdrop of perpetual disgruntlement and disdain from competing quarters – so many of cricket's issues boil down to a question of meaning. What is the purpose of this match, that series or some other format entirely?

England's September white-ball games tend to occupy second-class citizen status in the international summer; strange addenda to be endured around showers and impending gloom, before attention turns to winter activities on foreign shores. Even after these one-day and T20 internationals against South Africa, a second-string team that warrants nothing more than the description "England XI" will navigate the short trip across the Irish Sea for another three-match T20 series. Why? Well… because. Cricket.

There was one solitary day between the end of England's absorbing Test series with India and the start of the Hundred. That tournament then finished two days before this South Africa visit. In the two months before the upcoming Ashes, England will fly to New Zealand for six more white-ball matches; a fortnight after leaving Sydney for the fifth Test, they return to short-form fare in Sri Lanka. Can it really all matter?

Every sport, barring the behemoth that is football, is increasingly in thrall to mega-event culture. Take horse racing, where the continual growth of the Cheltenham Festival stands in inverse proportion to the prestige of jump racing's remaining calendar. England red-ball series against any of the other 10 Test nations now bow down in subservience to the Ashes – even this summer's India classic was habitually framed as preparation for the Australia showdown.

In the wake of England's seven-wicket mauling in the first ODI at Headingley on Tuesday, captain Harry Brook acknowledged those who had been short-changed in the stands, admitting "nobody wants to come and watch that". Franchise commitments had denied the hosts any preparation time, with pre-match training sessions sparsely attended.

> **The continued global format leaves England forced to solve their own malaise**

Priorities undeniably lie elsewhere: in August's controversial franchise gig that now bankrolls England's domestic game, and in the looming series Down Under that we are told will define Ben Stokes' captaincy legacy.

But this entire South Africa series is being played to full houses, with today's dead-rubber finale at the Utilita Bowl selling out last October within four days of general release. Somehow – amid the scrambling of players' brains from five days, to 100 balls, to 50 overs – England must care.

They have now lost five of their last six ODI series, also exiting the two most recent global tournaments at the earliest possible stage. With only the top eight nations in the ICC rankings qualifying directly for the next World Cup, England currently occupy the final berth, sandwiched between Afghanistan and West Indies. Since the start of the last World Cup, Bangladesh and Zimbabwe are the only Test nations with a worse ODI win percentage.

So, while England's domestic game has largely turned its back on elite 50-over fare – converting the One-Day Cup into a developmental competition played during the Hundred – the continuation of the international format leaves Brook's side forced to seek solutions to their own malaise.

Utilita Bowl, 11am, Sky Sports

England
South Africa

There are long-term plans in place: England's vastly experienced top five in this series have been installed as those intended as the foundation of their 2027 World Cup campaign. In Jacob Bethell, who struck a sparkling and hugely welcome 58 off 40 balls in defeat on Thursday at Lord's, there is a precocious player with huge potential, even if the grand proclamations of his future greatness may well be premature.

The latest defeat lacked the ignominy of the embarrassing first encounter, but if England's abject performance in the series opener had the hallmarks of wholesale catastrophe, the second loss raised more specific concerns as they fell five runs short of what would have been a record chase at Lord's.

Tuesday's humiliation was so hasty that Brook did not have the chance to deviate from his frontline bowling quartet. Two days later, the extent of the fifth-bowler conundrum was laid horribly bare.

England's three seamers, plus the superb Adil Rashid, combined for figures of six for 216 from their 40 overs – an economy rate of 5.4. Dotted throughout South Africa's innings as Brook forlornly attempted to find ways of hiding them, the part-time spin of Bethell and Will Jacks then cost one for 112 off the remaining 10 overs – an economy rate of 11.2.

The folly of Brook's preference to pack the batting line-up was exposed without a true all-rounder to balance the side, an error that might be rectified in the future with Sam Curran belatedly given a chance to prove himself as a late addition to the upcoming T20 squad. Rehan Ahmed, meanwhile, seems firmly lodged as Rashid's understudy rather than someone who could play alongside his fellow leggie.

The third seamer rotation has landed on Jamie Overton for the final ODI, meaning no immediate opportunity for Sonny Baker to banish the demons of Tuesday's brutal international debut, when he leaked 76 wicketless runs in seven overs. It seems talk of the Hampshire youngster potentially sneaking a place in the Ashes squad is premature, although he will hope to prove his worth in the Ireland T20 series.

This week granted that additional trip off after worryingly diminishing returns this summer, a visibly jaded Ben Duckett has one more England duty to serve after retaining his opening berth for Sunday's game. "We want to try to play our strongest side in every white-ball game," said Brook.

Brook has a project to build. But it just cannot be true. Some cricket has to mean more than others.

Next week

Is this the end of civilised sport as we know it?

We lost golf to the US years ago, now tennis looks like going to, but we have to draw the line at football

Giles Smith

The week's raging debate: has tennis gone to hell in a handcart? Or has it simply gone to America as it usually does at this time of year? Events at the US Open this past fortnight have seen the BBC diagnosing an "etiquette crisis" in the sport, and rooting it in what the website carefully described as the "electric" atmosphere in New York.

Should we be worried? True, apart from the ticketing and seating arrangements, little really distinguishes the courts at Flushing Meadows from any town centre on a Saturday night. But we've known this for a long while. As The Onion, America's leading satirical news source, pointed out just the other day, it's been 35 years now since spectators at the US Open were barred from operating leaf blowers in the stands.

New York has long been a place where tennis is assumed to be a spectacle that life doesn't need to sit in quiet awe of or even really pause for – a reasonable and healthy attitude, you could argue. It's only a game, and all that.

But then there was the viral furore over the millionaire CEO "snatching" a player's cap "from the hands" of a child. That did feel dark, at first sight. Two things here, though: first who knew that match-worn Kamil Majchrzak clothing items were hot? Making a note to check my attic.

Secondly, we'd have to concede that, certainly in baseball, undignified squabbling over stray mementoes between people who ought to know better is as old as America itself. There's a highlights reel on YouTube specifically devoted to "sports fans stealing balls from kids" – a veritable video flip book of adults tearing memorabilia from their tiny, defenceless hands.

It lasts more than three and a half minutes, was posted seven years ago and ranges right across the 21st century.

Again, then, nothing new here … except maybe a growing sense of this stuff catching on and affecting the conduct of the game itself.

"The crowds are kind of crazy," Jessica Pegula, the American fourth seed said this week. "They kind of get everyone riled up." Some claim to have detected a newly intemperate mood in 2025: net cords unashamedly unacknowledged, body shots struck with fresh abandon, sneaky underarm serves gleefully adopted even against impaired opponents, "animated discussions" between players after matches.

To that extent, it does seem legitimate to wonder whether tennis as we know it is really safe in America any more, if it ever has been, or whether a certain amount of obligatory degradation and a lingering sense of nastiness are, under the current administration, simply the tariff that sport has to pay these days in order to get through customs.

Ditto golf, maybe. Luke Donald, announcing his European team for this month's Ryder Cup, was already anticipating "a bear pit" – again, a familiar metaphor in this context, if never quite the right one. With bear pits, the dangerous item was traditionally the thing being looked down on by the gathered crowd, i.e. the bear.

At Ryder Cups, the menace tends to be coming from the people looking on. I'm no expert on military manoeuvres but I believe the term we're looking for here is "a bear pincer movement".

Anyway, Trump, it seems, will be in attendance at the Ryder Cup on day one, and maybe his presence on and around the greens will have a calming effect.

Or maybe it will be like all the other times at the Ryder Cup in the US, except just a little bit more extreme and a little bit more worrying, and a little bit more likely to infect the players, in keeping with our sense of things in these gradually coarsening times. You guess.

Meanwhile, those of us who love football and regard it as the increasingly isolated bastion of proportionate behaviour, by its participants and its spectators alike, can only note with anxiety where the lion's share of next summer's World Cup is set to take place.

Is it too late to do anything about that? We lost golf to America ages ago. We're apparently losing tennis. We draw the line at losing football because after that there will be literally nothing left of civilised sport.

Cap snatcher: The controversial moment a young kid lost out on Kamil Majchrzak's cap at the US Open.

Wrong footing? Roles reverse from speed walks to rugby mismatches

Home interest keeps the pace going for tournaments stuck in their ways, writes *Patrick Kidd*

The World Athletics Championships turns 50 next year, though the inaugural competition wasn't much of a jamboree. It consisted of one event – the men's 50km walk – and had been organised by the IAAF because the speedy amblers had been dropped from the Olympics.

The first world champion athlete was the 37-year-old Veniamin Soldatenko and the Soviet, who died in 2023, remains the oldest winner. Steve Cram and Daley Thompson were Britain's first world champions once it expanded, winning the 1500m and decathlon in Helsinki in 1983.

Race walking will open the 20th World Championships in Tokyo on Saturday, though the distance has been reduced to 35km, and while Britain has no chance in that, there are a few podium hopes later when Keely Hodgkinson and Georgia Hunter Bell go in the final of the 800m (**September 21, 11.35am**).

Home interest on day one will instead focus on Dina Asher-Smith and Zharnel Hughes in the heats of the men's and women's 100m at 10.55am and 12.35pm, and Laura Muir's qualifying race in the 1,500m at 11.50am (**all on TNT Sports 4 and BBC iPlayer**).

The Ryder Cup teams were confirmed last week with Europe changing only one initial (N to R Højgaard) from the side who won in 2023. This weekend, the amateur golfers compete at Cypress Point, California, in the 50th edition of the Walker Cup.

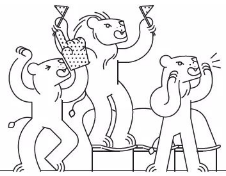
The Great Britain & Ireland team, who play a second day of foursomes and singles matches today (**Sky Sports Golf, 5.30pm and midnight**), includes Luke Poulter, whose father Ian was on six victorious Ryder Cup teams, but the US have not lost in the biennial contest since 2015.

There has been criticism of the one-sidedness of many group matches in the women's Rugby World Cup, with an average scoreline in the first two rounds of 53-11. Poor Brazil, for instance, lost 84-5 to France and 66-6 to South Africa. They have a final outing today against Italy (**BBC iPlayer 2pm**).

The quarter-finals that will begin on Saturday (**BBC Two, 1pm and 4pm**) should be more competitive. In the last men's Rugby League World Cup, which also had plenty of mismatches, Samoa lost to England in their opening match by 60-6 yet beat the same side in the semi-finals by a golden point.

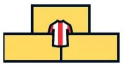
Ferrari have traditionally done well at their home grand prix. But hopes are not high (**today, Sky Sports F1, 2pm**) with a lacklustre Lewis Hamilton no better than fourth so far in his debut season. This year the Ferrari stallion has been more plodding than prancing.

Funfare

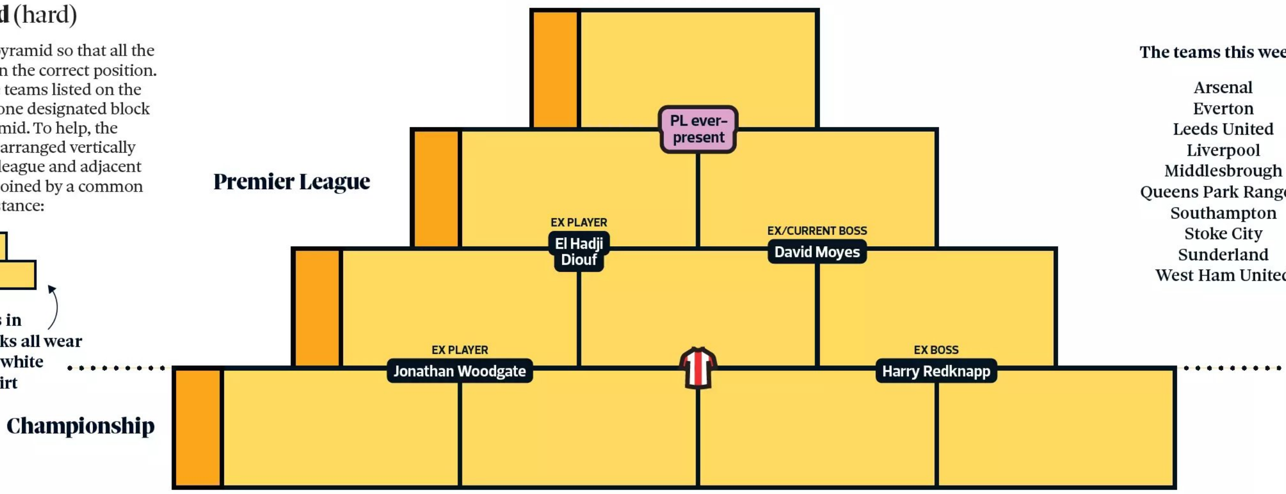


Pyramid (hard)

Fill in the pyramid so that all the teams are in the correct position. Each of the teams listed on the right have one designated block in the pyramid. To help, the pyramid is arranged vertically by current league and adjacent blocks are joined by a common link, for instance:



The teams in these blocks all wear a red-and white striped shirt


PL ever-present
Premier League
EX PLAYER
El Hadji Diouf
EX/CURRENT BOSS
David Moyes
EX PLAYER
Jonathan Woodgate
EX BOSS
Harry Redknapp
Championship

The teams this week:

Arsenal
Everton
Leeds United
Liverpool
Middlesbrough
Queens Park Rangers
Southampton
Stoke City
Sunderland
West Ham United

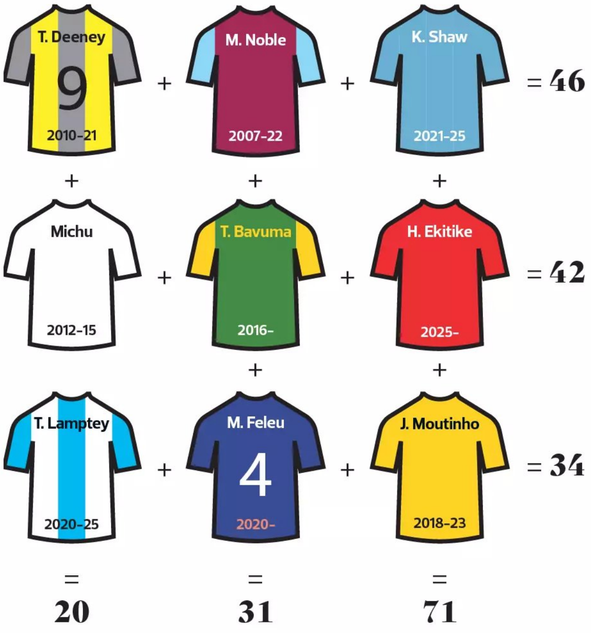
Memory bank (easy)

Each row describes a sporting event. With the clues provided, can you fill in the missing letters?

2023	🏀	V_____ W_________ m____ h__ N__ d____
2020	🎾	N____ O____ w___ h__ s_____ U_ O___ t____
2016	◯◯◯◯◯	F___, Jordan and K_____ w___ t____ f____ e___ O______ m_____
2011	⚽	A______ A______ r______ E_______ E__
2005	🏏	1st inns, Lord's: T__________ c L_____ b M______ (4), Strauss c W____ b M______ (2), Vaughan (3) and Bell (6) b M______
1998	🎯	R______ v__ B________ b______ W____ C_______

Shirt Sudoku (medium)

Fill in the number of each shirt so that the rows and columns add up to the totals provided.


T. Deeney
9
2010–21
+
M. Noble
2007–22
+
K. Shaw
2021–25
= 46
+
+
+
Michu
2012–15
+
T. Bavuma
2016–
+
H. Ekitike
2025–
= 42
+
+
+
T. Lamptey
2020–25
+
M. Feleu
4
2020–
+
J. Moutinho
2018–23
= 34
=
=
=
20
31
71

Answers: Pyramid – Top to bottom, left to right: Arsenal, Liverpool, Everton, Leeds United, Sunderland, West Ham United, Middlesbrough, Stoke City, Southampton, Queens Park Rangers.
Memory blanks – 2023: Victor Wembanyama makes his NBA debut. 2020: Naomi Osaka wins her second US Open title. 2016: Fiji, Jordan and Kosovo win their first ever Olympic medals. 2011: Arsenal Academy release Eberechi Eze. 2005: 1st inns, Lord's: Trescothick c Langer b McGrath (4), Strauss c Warne b McGrath (2), Vaughan (3) and Bell (6) b McGrath. 1998: Raymond van Barneveld becomes World Champion.
Shirt Sudoku – Row 1: 9, 16, 21. Row 2: 9, 11, 22. Row 3: 2, 4, 28.